Can Deacons Be Divorced?
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I have served as an elder and as a chairman of the elders at our church and have spent a good deal of time studying the qualifications for elders and deacons. The general consensus of evangelical scholars on the phrase "husband of one wife" in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is that it means the husband of one living woman. That is, it allows for a man to serve as an elder or deacon if his wife has passed away and he has remarried. This would seem to allow for a man to serve in these church leadership positions if he has been divorced and remarried. This is where it gets tricky. Jesus seemed to allow for divorce in the case of adultery (Matt. 5:31-32) and Paul added an allowance for divorce if left by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15). If a man seeking the office of elder or deacon had an unbelieving wife who left and divorced him, I would consider him eligible for office as long as he meets the other qualifications. However, if a believing wife and husband have sought divorce and the husband has remarried and is now seeking the office of elder or deacon, this would require a much deeper investigation into the circumstances. If the grounds for divorce were not biblical, then the subsequent marriages are suspect. I would not be inclined to allow such an individual to stand in church leadership because this would reflect poorly on their character and they may indeed be married in the eyes of God to two women. Paul instructs a married woman who leaves her husband to remain unmarried unless it is to be reconciled to her husband (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

The question today remains when you have a remarried couple who have sought forgiveness for their sin, what then? They may be forgiven and brought fully into the fellowship of the church but that does not necessarily mean the husband is qualified for an official position of leadership in the church. Elders and deacons are held to a higher standard. If I were divorced while a believer, I would no longer consider myself eligible for official leadership in the church. I can still serve and have a ministry but not as an official elder or deacon. I believe each situation must be evaluated individually and in depth. A man who has been divorced must expect to be questioned thoroughly about the nature of the divorce and whether any sin involved has been fully repented of, if he desires to serve as an elder or deacon.
What does the "husband of one wife" phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2 mean?
Can a divorced man serve as a pastor, elder, or deacon?

There are at least three possible interpretations of the phrase “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2.

1) It could simply be saying that a polygamist is not qualified to be an elder, a deacon or a pastor. This is the most literal interpretation of the phrase, but seems somewhat unlikely considering that polygamy was quite rare in the time that Paul was writing.

2) The phrase could also be translated “one-woman man.” This would indicate that a bishop must be absolutely loyal to the woman he is married to. This interpretation focuses more on moral purity than marital status.

3) The phrase could also be understood to declare that in order to be an elder/deacon/pastor, a man can only have been married once, other than in the case of a remarried widower.

Interpretations 2) and 3) are the most prevalent today. Interpretation 2) seems to be the strongest, primarily because Scripture seems to allow for divorce in exceptional circumstances (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16). It would also be important to differentiate between a man who was divorced and remarried before he became a Christian from a man who was divorced and remarried after becoming a Christian. An otherwise qualified man should not be excluded from church leadership because of actions he took prior to coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior. Although 1 Timothy 3:2 does not necessarily exclude a divorced or remarried man from serving as an elder/deacon/pastor, there are other issues to consider.

The first qualification of an elder/deacon/pastor is to be “above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2). If the divorce and/or remarriage results in a poor testimony for the man in the church or community, it may be the “above reproach” qualification that excludes him rather than the “husband of one wife” requirement. An elder/deacon/pastor is to be a man that the church and community can look up to as an example of Christ-likeness and godly leadership. If his divorce and/or remarriage situation detracts from this purpose, perhaps he should not serve in the position of elder/deacon/pastor. It is important to remember, though, that just because a man is disqualified from serving as an elder/deacon/pastor, he is still a valuable member of the body of Christ. Every Christian possesses spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-7) and is called to participate in edifying other believers with those gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7). A man who is disqualified from the position of elder/deacon/pastor can still teach, preach, serve, pray, worship, and play an important role in the church.
The Husband of One Wife
Pastor Randy Smith
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- 1 Timothy 3:12 - "Let deacons be husbands of only one wife..."

This particular element of spiritual qualifications for church office is one of many reference to the overarching quality that a man must be "above reproach" (not- "without sin," but rather blameless, unable to be accused, a "Teflon-man"). Biblically, the many qualifications for spiritual leadership revolve around three specific areas of mastery: leadership with family, personal character and ability to handle the Word (primarily elders).

Alexander Strauch said in his book on Biblical Eldership...The fundamental requirement for all church elders is that they be above reproach in all areas of life. This means that a Christian elder must be a man of good moral and spiritual reputation, who lives an irreproachable life in the sight of other people. An elder must be free from any offensive or damaging blight of character or conduct."

It is not difficult to understand why Paul begins each list with the premise of being above reproach. Following is always a statement about the man's leadership in his marriage and amongst his family. The home is the ultimate test of a man's leadership.

Specifically, the phrase "the husband of one wife" has been controversial throughout the history of the church. A wrong interpretation obviously allows unqualified men to have a place of leadership that God forbids or permits a qualified man from serving on man's standards.

Key question: What does it mean that He is to be the husband of one wife?

The phrase "husband of one wife" is literally a "one-woman man" in the original Greek.

Because this passage is so often misinterpreted, let's initially clarify what this phrase does not mean.

Some say what Paul means is:

1. The Man of God must be Married to the Church.
   This is the Roman Catholic view. An Elder then, must consider himself married to the church. This account obviously falls short of what Paul is describing. The qualification in 1:6-9 is to be taken literally, not figuratively. This is a very weak view and does not need to be considered.

2. The Man of God cannot be a Polygamist.
   Polygamy is having more than one wife. This view understands the passage as prohibiting polygamy for the life of a leader...only one wife at a time. But this could hardly be Paul's thought here. Polygamy is a sin that is forbidden for all, not just pastors. From the beginning of creation, God said that a man and woman were to leave and cleave together and become one flesh (Gen 2:20-25). It is very doubtful that there were
leaders in Crete or Ephesus who had two wives. Even Jewish law forbids this. This cannot be a consideration.

3. **The Man of God could Never Remarry.**
   This view holds that an elder may marry once, but if his wife dies, he may never remarry under any circumstance. Some commentators say that for a widowed elder to remarry showed weakness or a lack of self-control! But nowhere in Scripture is remarriage after a death of a spouse depicted as forbidden or even morally questionable. The problem is this view seems to read into the text: "An elder cannot be a remarried man." In addition, does not Paul say in I Cor 7:39 - "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord". Clearly then death of a marriage partner dissolved the marriage bond and the remaining partner was free to remarry. I can hardly think that there were so many widowed elders who were getting remarried that Paul had to put his foot down and stop them. This view goes beyond the bounds of Scripture and is out of balance with the overall biblical teaching regarding marriage.

4. **The Man of God Must be Married.**
   This view holds that a single man cannot be an elder. I do not think that this is the Apostle Paul's thought. Paul does not say that he must be "the husband of a wife," rather; he must be "the husband of one wife". If you pushed this view - you could go to Titus 1:6 and demand that an elder has children (plural) - "one" would not qualify him. In some parts of Russia, an elder must have five children to fulfill this kind of interpretation. Paul himself was single - I Cor 7; and was an elder as seen by I Tim 4:14, II Tim 1:6. Also, this contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture that expresses the advantages of being single (I Cor 7).

5. **The Man of God can Never be Divorced.**
   This view says that Paul was prohibiting a divorced man from serving as an elder. But if Paul was referring to divorce, he could have easily said: "The elder must be a man who has never been divorced." Those who believe Scripture prohibits divorce and remarriage (Mark 10:2-12; Romans 7:1-3) are inclined to disqualify all divorced and remarried men from church eldership. On the other hand, Christians who believe that Scripture permits divorce and remarriage in certain cases (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15) might allow certain divorced or divorced and remarried men to serve as elders. From their perspective, a biblical divorce-like death-dissolves the marriage bond and frees the individuals to remarry. (Strauch p. 220-221)

   Again, the problem is that elsewhere in Scripture the Bible teaches that remarriage after divorce is within God's will under two circumstances. 1) Divorce is allowed when one partner continues in hardhearted adultery. Jesus stated this in... Matt 5:31-32. Innocent party is free to remarry. 2) Divorce is acceptable when an unbelieving partner leaves. I Cor 7:15. Yes, God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), but is gracious to the innocent party when an unbelieving partner leaves.

   I do believe that divorce could be an issue disqualifying a man for leadership. Beyond
the cause of divorce, the date and spiritual status of the man must be considered. However, these issues fall more under the category of "above reproach" and not "the husband of one wife. I think Paul has a higher purpose for that qualification...

The issue here wasn't a man's marital status -> It’s greater than that, it’s the man's character and godliness lived out in the context of his home in relation to his wife.

For instance, I know men who have been married to only "one woman" their whole married life, but aren’t characterized as one-woman men. Maybe the man is married to one wife but the lover of two or three either in his heart’s affects or outright physical actions?

What does it mean to be the husband of one wife? Answer: The man of God must be a "one-woman man"! (This, as mentioned above, is the literal interpretation of the text) The man must be exclusively devoted to his wife in thought, desire and action. In other words, monogamy is not enough!

Viewed this way, Paul is not so much referring to the marital status of an elder/deacon as seen on a document, but to a biblical character trait of a man's heart. The phrase implies loyalty and faithfulness. The man must be characterized as a one-woman man, who is exclusively and totally devoted to his wife. This man is not flirtatious or promiscuous. The man is not involved in any questionable relationship with any other woman.

Alexander Strauch says: "This man must have an exclusive relationship to the woman. A one-woman man is a man above reproach in the marital relationship as well as all other male/female relationships. The man of God must be a man of unquestioned morality."

Kenneth Wuest, the Greek scholar said: "The elder should be a man who loves only one woman as his wife. It should be his nature to isolate and centralize his love."

A man who is a "looker," apart from any physical adultery, has already committed adultery in his heart and is thereby not a one-woman man. Jesus spoke on this subject with extreme clarity when he said... "Everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery in his heart." (Matt 5:28)

The key questions to ask regarding a man’s character in relation to his wife are...

- Are you a flirt?
- Are you known as a ladies-man?
- Are you a looker? (do you look twice or once too long?)
- Are you fantasizing about other women in your heart?
- Are you training yourself to be a one-woman man?

John MacArthur stated here.... "For the most part, evangelical Christianity during this century has focused on the battle for doctrinal purity, and it should, but we are losing the battle for moral purity. We have people with the right theology who are living impure. God's standard cannot be lowered for the sake of sympathy. All battles for the integrity of Scripture are ultimately in vain if the church's preachers are corrupt and the sheep no longer follow their shepherds as models of holiness. The church must have leaders who are above reproach."
Anything less is an abomination to God and spells disaster for the life of the church."
(Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry, John MacArthur p. 89)

This doesn't mean that a man who has sinned this way can never be forgiven...(not at all). It simply means that only a man who is morally pure and faithfully devoted to his wife is qualified to serve in the office of an elder or deacon.

Was this not Paul's fear? Paul knew that this type of sin could morally disqualify him from his office. I Cor 9:27 - "But I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified".

CONCLUSIONS:

- It does not seem possible that, by Paul's phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2, he intends to hold a man's pre-conversion sins against him (see 1 Pet. 4:3; Eph. 2:2; 4:17ff; 1 Cor. 12:2; Col 3:7). To judge a man's spiritual qualities on the basis of a sin committed before he was saved, before he was capable of understanding God's will or Word, and before he has the power of Christ's life within him is to create a false standard that detracts from God's wonderful grace and which also fails to deal with the real issue of 1 Timothy 3. It must be stated however, that like some other pre-conversion sins, a divorced and remarried man might be in a vulnerable condition, which could lead to embarrassing circumstances or subtle reproach.

- Regardless of one's view on divorce and remarriage, an acting elder/deacon who divorces while in office is under reproach and must be disqualified. The issue is not whether God forgives divorced people (of course He does) or whether a divorced person can serve God (of course he can). The real issue in this instance is the leader's public reproach on God's glory and the testimony of the church.

- Elders and Deacons must be devoted to their marital purity to be accepted into the office of church leadership and must stay that way to remain qualified.