

Message #12

I Timothy 3:2b

“The Husband of One Wife”

If ever there has been a lack of precision and study, if ever there has been a lack in the exegetical, historical, grammatical, theological and practical understanding of Biblical words, it is the words “the husband of one wife.” These words have been butchered and battered with very little attempt to “rightly divide” them. As a result, the church lives in total confusion as to what they actually mean.

Craig S. Keener, who has written a fine book which deals at length with this particular qualification, really hits the nail on the head when he writes: “One would hope, therefore, that the churches espousing a position would produce evidence that in ancient times the phrase “husband of one wife” would have been taken to mean just what their position implies; but, again regrettably, these churches have been slow to provide this evidence” (Craig Keener, ...*And Marries Another*, p. 83).

IF A CHURCH OF GOD IS TO BECOME A PILLAR AND SUPPORT OF THE TRUTH OF GOD, IT MUST HAVE MEN AS ELDERS AND DEACONS WHO MEET THE CHARACTER QUALIFICATION OF BEING FAITHFUL TO ONE WOMAN.

Men who desire to lead God’s church cannot be womanizers. They must be faithful and loyal to their wives.

QUESTION #1 – What are the various interpretations of the phrase husband of one wife?

As near as I can determine, in the history of Biblical interpretation, there have been eight different interpretations given as to what these words mean:

Interpretation #1 - A man who is a leader must not be a polygamist.

This view says a man who is a leader cannot have multiple wives living with him at the same time. Calvin called this “The only true exposition” (p. 77).

Interpretation #2 - A man who is an elder must not ever have been divorced.

There are a few who hold to this position—if ever a divorce for any reason, he is disqualified.

Interpretation #3 - A man who is an elder must not be divorced after salvation.

This view basically says that once a man is saved, his track record begins and from that point on, he must never go through a divorce.

Interpretation #4 - A man who is an elder may be divorced, but he cannot remarry.

This view allows for the possibility of a divorce for Biblical grounds, but does not allow for remarriage after the divorce.

Interpretation #5 - A man who is an elder must be married.

This view is based on a contextual point that a man is to be a manager of his own household, which presupposes marriage.

Interpretation #6 - A man who is an elder must be married to one church.

According to this position, the man is to be married to the Church and not be married to any woman.

Interpretation #7 - A man who is an elder must not remarry after his one wife dies.

In other words, if a man was married and his wife died and he remarried, he is disqualified from being an elder.

Interpretation #8 - A man who is an elder must be devoted to one woman.

This interpretation, which is held by many, suggests that the phrase means a man must be a one-woman man. That is he cannot be a womanizer, but must be devoted to one woman when he desires to serve. William Barclay says, "...in its context here we can be quite certain that the phrase means that the Christian leader must be a loyal husband, preserving marriage in all its purity" (p. 76).

QUESTION #2 – What are the weaknesses with these various interpretations?

Interpretation #1 - The weakness of the no-polygamist view.

- 1) Historically, many historians conclude polygamy was not a problem when Paul wrote I Timothy.
- 2) Most Gentile people being saved were not polygamists, so there would be no point in Paul bringing this subject up.
- 3) According to Keener, polygamy was against Roman law, but was only practiced in Palestinian Judaism. In fact, the Mishnah allowed a man to have up to 18 wives. But as Keener later states, "The fact that polygamy was practiced neither by the Jewish people in Asia nor by the Greeks there suggests that Paul would have had little reason to address this in his letter as a rule for church leaders there" (*Ibid.*, p. 88).

Interpretation #2 - The weakness of the no-divorce view.

(Weakness #1) - The word problem.

The word problem may be understood this way: if Paul meant a man who is an elder must not be divorced, why didn't he use the word divorce? Philip Towner sums up the problem: "...there is no first century evidence of its use in connection with divorce" (p. 85).

(Weakness #2) - The historical problem.

The historian Otto Kiefer writes: “A marriage could not, in early Rome, be dissolved. It follows that divorce was unknown at that period. Dionysius says, “Authorities are agreed that no marriage was dissolved at Rome for the space of 520 years” (p. 30).

Philip Schaff, the famed church historian, sums up this problem when he writes: “Divorce is said to have been almost unknown in the ancient days of the Roman republic...”. The truth is there was no need for divorce since the Roman world allowed a man to do anything he wanted. He could have girlfriends and concubines. As Schaff says, “...the husband always had an easy outlet for his sensual passions in the intercourse with slaves and concubines” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, p. 162).

Since divorce was not an issue in the first century, it makes no sense that Paul would mean divorce, when he didn't even use the word divorce.

(Weakness #3) - The Biblical problem.

There are times, in the Bible, when divorce is not wrong and when remarriage is not sinful. As Towner writes: “Even though the New Testament takes a fairly strong stand on the issue of divorce, there are exceptions to the rule” (p. 84). It is not logical that Paul would negate something he himself approved or something that Jesus Christ stated.

(Weakness #4) - The contextual problem.

Contextually, the point is these qualifications are attainable in the present tense. If the interpretation is no divorce, then they aren't attainable for one divorced. We cannot make one contextually impossible and make the others potentially possible.

(Weakness #5) - The theological problem.

The theological problem is simple. God's Word says one in Christ is a new creation. God's Word says, “all things” become new. If we take a “no divorce” position, we must say all things become new, except you cannot ever really have your sin of divorce forgiven and you cannot ever be a leader in God's church. Such an interpretation is contrary to sound theology.

(Weakness #6) - The practical problem.

There have been many men in history who have been divorced that have pastored churches and been mightily used by God. Philip Schaff writes: “...in the early part of the third century, there were many clergymen who had been married a second or even a third time, and this practice was defended on the ground that Paul allowed remarriage...” (*Ibid.*, p. 183).

Interpretation #3 - The weakness of the must be married view.

The main weakness of this view is that Paul does not use the word married and at the time he wrote this, he himself wasn't married and there is no evidence that neither was Timothy.

Furthermore, this interpretation negates a Biblical ideal of remaining single so one can devote total energy to serving the Lord (I Cor. 7:32).

Interpretation #4 - The weakness of the must be married to the Church view.

The weakness of this view is that it allegorizes the words Paul wrote. Instead of taking the words literally, this interpretation makes one woman mean one Church. Philip Schaff says there were three legalistic steps which ultimately led to this ascetic interpretation that a man could not be married to a woman, but needed to be married only to the church:

Step #1 - The prohibition for any second marriage by clergy;

Step #2 - The prohibition of marriage after ordination;

Step #3 - The prohibition of any marriage for clergy.

Schaff says these steps were taken from the third to the fourth centuries (*Church History*, Vol. 2, pp. 182-184).

Interpretation #5 - The weakness of the must never remarry view.

The weakness for this is that there is no scriptural support and it comes from a Romanistic legalism that is unbiblical. Paul specifically encourages younger widows to remarry (I Tim. 5:14).

QUESTION #3 – What is an interpretation of “husband of one wife” that is the best overall, taking into consideration all key interpretive matters?

The interpretation which I and many other commentators believe is the best is the view that says the phrase “husband of one wife” means that when a man desires to be a leader, he must be a man devoted to one woman. He must be a man highly committed to God, and if he is married, he must be faithful and highly committed to his wife. He cannot be sexually promiscuous or flirtatious with other women. He must be a “man of one woman.”

Reason #1 - Because this interpretation agrees precisely with the historical background of the first century Roman world.

Let me cite some words, some quite graphic, from Otto Kiefer, who clearly and accurately describes the Roman world's view toward sexuality:

“Cato, in concise and prosaic language, describes the contrasting situations of an adulterous wife and an adulterous husband: ‘If you take your wife in adultery you may freely kill her without trial.’

But if you commit adultery, or if another commits adultery with you, she has no right to raise a finger against you” (*Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*, p. 32).

Kiefer further records that Augustus gave the first legislation that made it possible for a man to have a concubine without marriage: “A man could live in concubinage with a woman of his choice instead of taking her to wife” (*Ibid.*, p. 39).

Both young and old, single and married, were encouraged to engage in sexual activity with prostitutes. Seneca said, “He has done no wrong, he loves a prostitute” (*Ibid.*, p. 55). Again “It is indeed the truth that prostitution and the frequentation of prostitutes by young men were an old generally recognized custom in Rome. ... Everything relating to sex was regarded as completely natural (*Ibid.*, pp. 56-57).

When Paul wrote I Timothy to Timothy, Timothy was in Ephesus, which featured the temple of Diana, which featured temple prostitutes. In fact, prostitution was part of the city and the actual worship services (*ISBE*, Vol. 2, p. 843).

Paul’s point is historically simple and clear; if a man is to be a leader in God’s church, he cannot be carrying on sexual relationships with anyone but his wife; therefore, he must be a man of one woman. This clearly agrees with the historical background.

Reason #2 - Because this interpretation agrees precisely with the actual words Paul wrote.

The actual words translated “husband of one wife” literally read “a man of one woman.” The particular construction “of one woman” is a genitive of description without an article. When we have this construction, according to Dana and Mantey, “the adjectival relation is strengthened” (p. 117). What all of this technical language means is that Paul really wants to emphasize, by this construction, that the man who is a leader must be devoted to one woman. This is an emphatic devotion or dedication.

Paul is stressing the man who desires to lead must be a “one-woman-man.” He cannot be a womanizer or one who lusts for other women. He must be a man highly devoted and dedicated to his wife. Dr. John MacArthur said it well when he said these words mean “...an elder is to be single-minded in his devotion to his wife. If he is not married, he is not to be a flirtatious type” (*The Master’s Plan For The Church*, p. 187).

Since the words “church,” “divorce,” “marriage” or “death” don’t even show up in this context and since the actual words emphasize a man’s devotion to his wife, this is the easiest interpretation to support for it lets Paul’s words stand on their own merit.

Reason #3 - Because this interpretation agrees precisely with sound doctrine Paul wrote.

The whole emphasis of Pauline doctrine is in Christ you are a new creation, now go on and develop for the glory of God.

Never can we find Paul suggesting that the potential of not being used by God because some previous failure is operative. Paul challenges people to forget the things behind and press on.

For example, when he wrote to the carnal believers of Corinth, he describes their lives prior to faith in Christ in the worst possible language (I Cor. 6:9-11a). Yet he points out their new position and expects them to go on and develop and use their God-appointed gifts (I Cor. 6:11; 12:27-28).

It is totally inconsistent with Pauline thought and theology to suggest that one's previous failures prevent one from being greatly used as a leader for God. Paul himself had been a murderer by his own admission.

Reason #4 - Because this interpretation agrees precisely with Paul's straightforward personality.

Paul was not a man to skirt issues or couch things in difficult metaphorical language. When he wanted to say something he said it. For example, he told the Corinthians to put a man out of the church so Satan could destroy his flesh (I Cor. 5:1-5). He called certain individuals "accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9). He called Peter a hypocrite right to his face, in front of a crowd of people (Gal. 2:11-14). He also said he hoped certain legalists would mutilate themselves while being circumcised (Gal. 5:11-12). Paul was not a man to mince words.

We can be sure if Paul meant a man should not be divorced or if he meant a man must be married or never remarried, or if he meant a man must be married to the church, he would have clearly stated it in no uncertain terms. But the words he actually uses literally mean a man must be a one woman man.

When a man desires to be a leader in God's church, he must be devoted to one woman. As Lenski said, "The commentators of the early church misunderstood Paul because of their un-Pauline asceticism and not because his words are not clear" (p. 582).

Being devoted to one woman really stems from being devoted to Jesus Christ!