

Husband of One Wife: What is Does/Does Not Mean

Introduction and Background:

The modern Church has developed many different ideas and doctrines as to the content and structure of its leadership. This leadership question within the church has stirred many a debate within denominational, non-denominational, and un-denominational churches. The office of elder within the structure of church leadership has proven to be a fertile plot of ground for discussion. Most assuredly, the question of who is able to fill this office of elder has over the span of time taken on many different forms. One of the key topics on the subject of who should fill the office of elder is centered on the marital status of the elder candidate.

"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." 2 Timothy 3:1 (NASB) This verse in Timothy begins the discussion of the content surrounding the character of elder within the leadership structure of the local church. The Greek word for 'aspires' in verse one is 'epithumeo' literally meaning 'to lust after.'¹ A further look into the

¹ Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright © 1994, 2003 Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc.

literal meaning reveals that this Greek word 'epithumeo' stresses the inner impulse rather than the object desired. Directly following this verse Paul relates to Timothy the qualities that describe the office of elder. Therefore, Paul is teaching that the man seeking to be an elder does not desire the "office of elder," but rather he desires to be the type of man who has these qualities outlined in the following verses.

In the following verses of chapter three Paul discusses these qualities that the elder candidate should lust after. "The overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money." 1 Timothy 3:2-3 (NASB) The quality which will be examined in this study is the quality listed previously, "the husband of one wife."

Summary of Various Interpretations

The interpretations surrounding the "husband of one wife" are varied and highly controversial. Most churches today have adopted the checklist mentality concerning these verses. They, therefore, have labeled these qualities as qualifications. In doing so, church bodies have made the attempt to define each one of these "qualifications." When

one reads the English translation of the original Greek text (husband of one wife), it is understandable that on these checklists that one would read: "currently married, never divorced- check or no check." Mark Van Bebber elaborates on this view:

This view states that a man must be married in order to be accepted as an elder. Supporters of this view emphasize that the proper role of the elder is to be a good example to all the church. This would include his family life; being a good manager of his household and having children who believe. This is not possible if the man is not married.²

The predominant view of this scripture is the prohibition of divorce. Van Bebber continues to expound upon the issue of this verse prohibiting divorce as well as the elder candidate currently being married:

This is probably the most widely held view at this time among conservative evangelicals. Simply stated, no man who has ever had a divorce is eligible for the office of elder. It is contended that divorce was easily obtained by the Jews and the Romans during that period of history and that the church was to be an example of what God had originally intended for his people. Therefore, no divorced man should be considered for leadership. Although some argue that this interpretation is unnecessarily harsh and unfair, supporters of this view contend that the very existence of a set of qualifications indicated that not all people are to be eligible for leadership roles but that this in no way should eliminate them from other sorts of ministry.

² Van Bebber, Mark. "What does it mean to be the husband of one wife?" Christian Answers.net Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2006; available from <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-f008.html>

The question of whether or not this should include divorces prior to conversion is often asked. Many of those that hold to this view would argue that for those men who are to be considered for this high office, there must be no record of divorce or other marital infidelity, even before conversion. Indeed, this restriction would help to eliminate any embarrassing situations which could result in the disgrace of the church.³

Understanding these verses in this manner surely disqualifies many men from ever serving in the church as elder. If one were to follow the logic of this mentality then a man who is widowed or has not had any children could not serve as elder as well. This makes the pool even shallower, and is the very reason that so many of modern day churches are without any elders. This would logically seem to conflict with Paul's ability to appoint elders in every church just one year following the inception of these churches. "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they believed." Acts 14:23 (NASB) Some of these very churches were planted in cosmopolitan centers infested with many kinds of evil. Paul, who authored these very verses to Timothy, was able to find and appoint a plurality of elders in every one of these churches.

³ Van Bebber, Mark. "What does it mean to be the husband of one wife?" Christian Answers.net Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2006; available from <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/eden-f008.html>

The Priority of the Original Greek Text

As mentioned previously, it is easy to understand why a church body could easily make the interpretations discussed based on the English "husband of one wife." However, sound hermeneutics should be the guiding principle for evaluation. Therefore, the original Greek must be examined to gain a proper understanding of the text.

Merely evaluating the English translation is a dangerous proposition. A concrete example of blindly trusting the English text is the translation verses transliteration of the Greek word 'baptizo.'⁴ This dynamic that allowed for the Greek word baptizo meaning to immerse, plunge, or dip to be transliterated rather than translated is the very same dynamic that has taken precedence here in this passage in first Timothy. The translators approached the text apologetically with a theological bias to support. So it is then necessary to examine two areas concerning the priority of the original Greek text.

What the Text Does Not Say

The first area to be examined concerning the original Greek is evaluating what the text does not say. The text

⁴ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright © 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

does not read "me apoluo" meaning "never divorced."⁵ It is reasonable to conclude that if Paul had the intention to prohibit divorce concerning this issue then he would have included this phrase "me apoluo." Van Bebber again explains:

This view (prohibiting divorce) has much support and is not easily discredited. However, there is reason to doubt that the prohibition of divorce is what Paul intended to communicate. For instance, if Paul had merely wanted to forbid a divorced man from being an elder, the Greek language could easily have communicated this thought. Rather than give a negative command concerning marriage, he states the requirement in a positive manner. In this way, Paul calls the elder to an even higher qualification of leadership.⁶

So, it is then easy to ascertain what is clearly not written in the original text. The original text simply does not say never divorced.

What the Text Does Say

Having established what the text does not say and also the principles under girding the English translation, it is then beneficial and absolutely critical to examine what the original Greek text does say. One of the primary fundamental principles of proper hermeneutics is to

⁵ Van Bebber, Mark. "What does it mean to be the husband of one wife?" Christian Answers.net Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2006; available from <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-f008.html>

⁶ BibleSoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright © 1994, 2003 BibleSoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc.

evaluate a word in its proper context. One aspect of adhering to this principle is to allow the broad meaning of a given word to take precedence unless the context dictates a restricted meaning. The original Greek text translated in most English texts as "husband of one wife," is "mias gunakis andros."⁷ The broad meaning of the word 'andros' is simply translated 'man.' The constricted meaning of andros can be husband but no where in the body of the text is it inherently implied that this meaning should be applied. Due to the same dynamic mentioned previously concerning the word baptizo the translators theological bias apparently seeped into the text.

The phrase "mias gunakis andros" taken literally utilizing the broad meaning for the word andros allows for this English translation; "one woman man." Ed Glascock elaborates further on this assessment:

This view holds that the translation "husband of one wife" is not the best understanding of the Greek phrase mias gunaikos andra, but that it should be translated "a man of one woman" or a "one-woman man." This understanding emphasizes the character of the man rather than his marital status. Thus even a single man or a man who has been married only once must demonstrate that he is not a "playboy" or flirtatious, but that he is stable and mature in character toward his wife or other females. A man who demonstrates a

⁷ Interlinear Transliterated Bible. Copyright © 1994, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.

character of loyalty and trustworthiness in such personal relationships is qualified in this area. He, being a one-woman type of man, can be placed in this high position and trusted to deal in maturity and with discretion in a situation involving female members. This view shifts the emphasis away from an event that took place in a man's life before his conversion and properly concentrates on the character and quality of his life at the time of his consideration for this high office.⁸

Therefore, it is then clear that the phrase one woman man is a reasonable and preferred translation focusing on the character of the elder candidate rather than an examination of his historical situation. The question should be one of the overall spiritual maturity of the individual at the present time rather than the utilization of the aforementioned checklist mentality.

Conclusion and Summary

Having examined all these facets of the issue that is elder "qualification" and specifically the marital status, it is clear that the overall mentality when faced with all these descriptors listed in Timothy should be focused on the character of the elder candidate. A church body should evaluate the elder in light of these verses on the quality of his character in each of these areas. The quality of each man in these areas would likewise increase as he

⁸ Keathely, J. Hampton III, Th.M. "Qualifications for the evaluation of elders and deacons." Bible.org Home page [web site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2006; available from http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=433

matures in the Christian faith. So the main issue to be broached is evaluating the spiritual maturity of the man who lusts after these very qualities. Van Bebber sums up concisely the theme of this entire discussion:

When examining the qualifications of an elder, it is important to look at the overall idea of the passage as well as the specific grammar and construction. These qualities were meant to show that a leader in the church must be a Godly man. The elders of the church were to act as examples, to the church and the community, of Christ-like living. This is seen in Paul's first qualification, which most believe to be the key to all of the other specifications, "An overseer, then, must be above reproach." This condition sets the tone for the remaining qualities, including the question of marital status.⁹

The key issue coursing throughout this entire discussion is the right use of the Bible. This key should be the goal of every Christian who desires for the Church to serve its purpose upon this earth. God desires for His Kingdom to grow, and thus He has places the responsibility upon the members of this Kingdom to facilitate its increase. As Paul related later to Timothy, Christians must take care with the Word of God; "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman, who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15 (NASB)

⁹ Van Bebber, Mark. "What does it mean to be the husband of one wife?" Christian Answers.net Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2006; available from <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-f008.html>