

A legalistic view of the elder/overseer lists found in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 does not tell us who qualifies for elder in the church. The lists certainly communicates the type of man who should serve as elder but legalism always rots everything it touches! As Charles Hodge has pointed out, "Some make the qualifications only legalities This means the Elder Son in Luke 15 could have qualified! Also the Pharisee in Luke 18!"¹ A frightening thought. Especially when you consider that the former prodigal in the parable might be considered "unqualified" even after repentance! How often we major in minors and lose sight of what God considers major! By legalistically interpreting the lists we can find a man who meets all the "requirements" but may not have the character or the heart that is essential for one to be an elder. In our quest for qualifications we have lost sight of what Paul emphasized is necessary for one to be an elder among God's people.

Two issues have become benchmarks among many churches in selecting elders are the subject of divorce and the subject of having baptized children. Are these issues addressed in the letters to Timothy and Titus? What place should they have in helping us to recognize spiritual, godly men as leaders among us?

Divorced Church Leaders?

Divorce is one of the most serious social problems facing our society today. No church remains unaffected from this break down of biblical values. Considering the current situation, churches are seeing an increase in the number of members who have suffered a divorce. A divorced man who is currently living a faithful, godly life is permitted, in most congregations, to teach Bible classes, wait on the Lord's Table, lead prayer, lead singing and do virtually anything for which he is gifted in service to the church. There remains, however, one looming stigma, in the thoughts of many: he can never in his lifetime serve the church as a deacon or elder.

Proof Texts

The "proof texts" used to support this idea of divorced men being ineligible for service in these positions of leadership are 1 Tim. 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6. Each of these contains the phrase commonly translated, "the husband of one wife" (curiously, it is translated "but one wife" in the NIV). This phrase has traditionally been interpreted to mean "having had only one wife in his lifetime." The death of one's wife is sometimes viewed as an exception to the rule rendering the final interpretation, "never having been divorced and remarried." Is this prohibition against divorced men firmly rooted in Scripture or could it be that we are binding where God has not bound?

The question we must ask of these texts is not, "What do I think this phrase means?" but "What did Paul mean when he used this phrase?" Is it necessary to assume that Paul was talking about divorce and remarriage or is there another issue being addressed? The word "divorce" never appears in any of the Pastoral letters as it does in 1 Cor. 7 where

¹ Charles Hodge, *My Elders*, (Fort Worth, TX: Star Bible & Tract Corp., 1976), p.46.

Paul specifically addresses the issue. If Paul wanted to say "having never been divorced" he could easily have said so and thus ended all debate. Since he did not we must at least be open to honestly examine another possible interpretation.

Translation Tradition and Commentary Tradition

One problem interpreting this phrase is translation tradition. In choosing how to translate words and phrases into English translators are often faced with several alternative translations. Translation tradition takes place when a word or phrase has been translated a certain way for so long that using an alternative translation is considered unthinkable. The translation "husband of one wife" goes all the way back to Wycliffe's translation of 1380, but does this communicate Paul's point or obscure it?

It is possible to translate the phrase "husband of one wife" as "faithful to his wife." A passage of great help in determining the meaning of this difficult phrase is 1 Tim. 5:9. In giving a list of characteristics that must be in a widow's life before she can receive consistent help from the Ephesian church Paul said she must have been, "the wife of one husband." The phrase is identical to the one under consideration except that the genders are reversed. The NIV translates this phrase, "has been faithful to her husband." Why were the NIV translators not consistent and translate the texts referring to elders and deacons as "faithful to his wife?" Breaking with longstanding tradition the recently published New Living Translation consistently translated each occurrence as "faithful to his wife" and "faithful to her husband". Likewise Today's New International Version corrected the inconsistency of the NIV by translating the phrases as "faithful to his wife" and "faithful to her husband".

A second problem in understanding the phrase "husband of one wife" is commentary tradition. Many commentators write that this phrase means "never having been divorced and remarried" but often offer little or no defense to justify such an interpretation. This has been accepted as Paul's meaning for so long that many commentators simply "copy" one another instead of studying the text "afresh."

Author's Intent

To understand the meaning of the phrase "husband of one wife" we must get beyond translations and commentaries and seek to understand the author's intent. What are the contexts in which this phrase was used? Paul's concern about elders and deacons was not their distant past but their character at the present time. The other items in the lists must all be interpreted in terms of "how is this man doing currently?" When Paul wrote of those men being "temperate," "self-controlled," "respectable," "hospitable," "able to teach," etc. . . . he means, "are they presently like this?" When Paul wrote of them as "not given to drunkenness" he does not mean that never in their lives have they ever been a drunkard, but, are they presently drunkards? Obviously, when Paul wrote that they "must not be a recent convert" he does not mean that they had never been considered a recent convert! Why then should we interpret "husband of one wife" to mean he has always been the "husband of one wife?" If every other item in these lists

concern a man's present state, it seems logical that "husband of one wife" is a present, observable trait, not an unchangeable past condition.

Paul wrote that those men must be "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2), "worthy of respect" (1 Tim. 3:8) and "blameless" (Titus 1:6). Each of these terms served as "headings" for a list of character qualities. These qualities were to be examined, enabling one to determine whether a man had the kind of reputation necessary to serve as a leader in God's church. Just because a man has been divorced at some point in his life does not mean that he will never be seen as having an impeccable character, nor does it mean he will never be considered as one who is living an exemplary life worthy of imitation.²

Should We Keep Him From Serving?

I have a good friend who married early in life. Within a short period of time his wife committed adultery and eventually divorced him. During this painful period following the divorce he heard the gospel and responded to the Lord's invitation. Today he is remarried to a godly woman and together they have reared two children who are now faithful Christian adults. He has been a selfless, giving, humble Christian serving the same church for many years. He is respected by outsiders, having converted many of his neighbors, friends and co-workers to the Lord. He is respected within the church having taught, counseled and led in a variety of ways.

Is this the kind of man Paul wanted to keep from serving as an elder or deacon? Of course not! Paul was calling for a man who was faithful to his wife, "a one-woman sort of man," living an exemplary married life; a man who loves only one woman as his wife and has developed a strong relationship that others can imitate. We desperately need such men serving today as elders and deacons!

Please do not misunderstand this. Divorce is not trivial--just the opposite, we need men who exemplify marriage as Christ intended. A man's divorce might very well be the

² For further reading on this interpretation see: E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The Moffatt NT Commentary (London, England: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), p. 31; Kenneth A. Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 53; Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1974), p. 55; Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, translated by Philip Buttolph and Adela Yarbro (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 52; Gordon D. Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), pp. 80-81; David L. Smith, "The Case for Clergy Divorce," *Didasdalía* 2(April 1991):12-17; Craig S. Keener, . . . And Marries Another (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), pp. 83-103; Robert L. Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131(July 1974):229-240; Ed Glasscock, "The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140(July 1983):244-258; and Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), pp. 231-235.

reason he has a bad reputation thus rendering him ineligible for leadership positions. The point is that we must stop making rules where God has not! There is no blanket law of God that disqualifies a divorced man from serving as an elder or deacon. What God requires is that his leaders be respected as godly, faithful husbands, worthy of imitation.

" . . . A Man Whose Children Believe . . . "

In writing to Timothy Paul wrote that the overseer must "manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect" (1 Tim. 3:4). This is followed with the comment, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (3:5). Such instruction seems to be straight forward enough. An elder must be a responsible father. If an elder is not respected for his ability to father he will not be respected as a church leader.

Believing Children or Trustworthy/Faithful Children?

Paul's instruction to Titus concerning the elder and his children has a little different slant. An elder must be ". . . a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (Titus 1:6). Why were not identical instructions written to Timothy and Titus? Because Paul is writing to two different situations. His meaning in this verse and the one above from 1 Timothy are similar but not identical. There is a particular emphasis placed upon the instruction in Titus that is not found in 1 Timothy.

Since Paul used the word *pistos* (translated believe in this verse in the NIV) some commentators look through their concordance and notice that *pistos* is often used in the NT in connection with belief in Jesus as the Christ. Since baptism is how one expresses belief in Christ and accepts the salvation Christ offers through his death on the cross; this verse has been interpreted to mean, "having children who are old enough, and have been baptized." Some are surprised when they realize that this is the only verse that supports this belief! But does this verse really support it?

Obviously *pistos* is often used in the NT to mean baptized believers. This word is translated in 1 Timothy in reference to: believers for which Timothy was to set an example (4:12), any woman who was a believer and had widows in her family (5:16) and slaves who had believing masters (6:2). In each case it is obvious Paul is using the word in the sense of one who is in a saved relationship to Jesus evidenced by their belief.

However, consider how the word is used in Titus. It is translated trustworthy by the NIV twice. Once in 1:9 "trustworthy message," and the other in 3:8 "trustworthy saying." Why not be consistent and translate 1:6 "trustworthy children?" The word itself does not imply anything about the age of the children nor their understanding and acceptance of the gospel message. The translation could go either way: "believing children" or "trustworthy children." The context must determine the meaning.

Context

Paul's explanation as to why the elder's children must be trustworthy or faithful is so that they will ". . . not be open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (1:6). Paul is saying nothing in regards to the age of children nor their belief and baptism into Christ. "Wild and disobedient" is the opposite of "trustworthy" or "faithful." If a man has children that are not trustworthy, meaning they are wild and disobedient he is not the man to appoint to be an elder! He obviously has matters at home that need attention and besides, he will not be blameless in that people will not respect his family life. Strauch agrees with this interpretation,

The translation having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion is better rendered as having faithful children, which is its rendering in the King James Version. This translation renders the Greek word, pistos, in a passive sense meaning faithful, loyal, trustworthy, trusted, or dutiful (1 Corinthians 4:17), which better suits the strong contrast with dissipation or rebellion that follows.

In other words, Paul does not set up a contrast between believing and unbelieving children. Even the best Christian fathers cannot guarantee that all their children will really believe. To say this passage means believing Christian children places an impossible standard upon a father.³

In keeping with the emphasis in the book of Titus upon proper conduct it was especially important that elders have children who were not an embarrassment to them and the Christian community. Certainly it would be preferred to have baptized, believing children if such were old enough to understand and respond to the Gospel. However, it is not required in Scripture. If a man is not doing a good job at home in training his children he will not do a good job as an elder.

Conclusion

What is the emphasis of 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9? Is it not character, integrity, honesty, morality, reputation and holiness? Issues such as divorce, the age of one's children and if the children have responded to the gospel are important and must not be ignored. Not because God has specifically included them in some sort of qualification list, but because these things could say something about a man's integrity and faithfulness to God. But, to make these issues benchmarks that draw absolute lines of division between "qualified" and "unqualified" is to go beyond the meaning of Scripture.

We should be just as concerned to know what non-believers in the community and neighbors think about the man. How about his business associates? What do they think of the man? What does his wife think about him? How has he conducted himself in his relationships within the body? Are people in the congregation afraid of him? Why?

¹Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1986), pp. 269-170.

How needful it is for us to seek out men in the church who are honest, open, spiritual minded, honorable, respected husbands and fathers, mature and sincere. Men who have the ability to teach and persuade people to do what is right in the sight of God. Men who love the Lord and love the Lord's people. Ask those men to devote their primary attention to helping the congregation grow in their knowledge and acceptance of God's ways. Call them elders and ask them to shepherd the church.