

CAN A DIVORCED MAN SERVE AS ELDER?

Theological Study
Central Bible Church
2021-2022

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Elders of Central Bible Church launched a study of the Scriptures to discern what the Bible says regarding the topic of a divorced man serving as an elder in his local church. The longstanding position of the church—the more traditional perspective—is that a man with *any* divorce in his background could not serve in such an important leadership capacity. Respecting the more than 100 years of committed, theological thoughtfulness that held this position, present elders have explored this topic for several important reasons:

Candidates who are qualified in every other area are desirous to serve. As in any church, Central Bible Church has well-qualified, spiritually mature men who are qualified in every other dimension required of elders, but who have been divorced. It is important that the church understand the fullness of this qualification so it does not unfairly limit any candidate who could otherwise serve.

The limiting texts have not been clearly explained. While Central Bible Church has historically held the “no divorce” qualification found in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, the texts have not been clearly explained beyond the presumptive interpretation that “husband of one wife” means “never divorced.” Recent elders have not uncovered any previous study of such an important phrase that would either strengthen the present position or suggest a reasonable alternative meaning.

We wish to be consistent with our practices. While Central Bible Church does not have the office of Deacon, we have many men (and women) serving in such a servant role throughout our church. These men are teachers, Shepherds, Home Group Leaders, team leaders, etc. Some of these men have been divorced. Yet, Paul demands that such servants also be the “husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12). So, if any church forbids a divorced man from serving as Elder, they must also forbid any divorced man from serving in any ministry capacity, whether the position is an official office or not. To restrict divorced men in one position but allow them in the other is theologically inconsistent.

Our search is worth it. Several years ago, Central Bible Church made extensive study of the role of women in leadership. We undertook that study because we wished to grant the greatest opportunity to women that the Bible allows. Since it is a noble thing if a man desires to serve as elder (1 Timothy 3:1), we believe that qualified men should not be disqualified from serving unless we have a solid, biblical limitation. We don’t want to forbid what the Bible allows and vice-versa.

It is important to note that there are no unique, present circumstances which drive this theological study. Central Bible Church doesn’t have a lack of otherwise qualified candidates and thus need to broaden boundaries to fill vacant seats on its Board. Neither is the church giving in to any cultural shift that demands equal opportunity for all people. This study reflects the goal of a biblical defense for our position and consistency across our leadership positions.

To arrive at a cogent position, the church must wrestle with several, interrelated issues:

1. What if the divorce occurred *before* the man became a Christian? Has not his faith in Christ brought him into a new dimension of living (2 Corinthians 5:17)? The list of qualifications says nothing about idolatry, murder, or sexual abuse. Could a man have committed any of *these* sins before becoming a Christian and still be allowed to serve as elder? Before answering, we must realize that Paul

martyred Christians before meeting Christ and yet he was a qualified Apostle and Elder to the churches of Christ.

2. What if the man shared no fault in regard to his previous divorce? In Matthew 5 and 19, Jesus gives limited permission regarding divorce. In the instance of *porneia*—when one party violates the marriage covenant by intimately introducing a third party into the marriage through adultery—the offended party may legally and biblically end the marriage through divorce. In such instances, the offended party shares no guilt. Imagine a case where a wife has had an affair and divorces her husband. In what way is he responsible or perpetually limited because of *her* sinful actions? If Jesus (and Paul) permit divorce, in what way is this a disqualification for leadership? ¹
3. Some will argue that a man *might* possibly be divorced, but he could not be remarried and qualify as the “husband of one wife.” But, in instances where Jesus and Paul permit divorce, they *also* permit remarriage among parties who were blameless. Once again, how could Jesus’ and Paul’s *permission* create *disqualification*?
4. How could a church which forbids divorced candidates from serving as Elder allow such men to function in the role as deacons? Though there is a slight difference between the office and the function of deacon, the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy certainly apply to a person’s qualifications for service, not just holding a title. This is a problem of consistency that must be addressed.

With these important questions on the table, we now turn to the few relevant texts that address the topic of divorce in selecting elder candidates.

RELEVANT TEXTS

There are two specific texts which address the marital status of candidates who would serve as elders in the local church. Both texts will be considered together because of their similarity of context and content.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵ (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷ He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.

Titus 1:6-9

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. ⁷ Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁸ Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

¹ More information about the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage from a biblical perspective can be found in Central Bible Church’s position paper on Divorce and Remarriage.

The relevant, but somewhat ambiguous phrase in both texts is “the husband of one wife.” The Greek phrase is translated “a one-woman man.” This has led to numerous interpretations along a spectrum of requirements. The most significant interpretations follow:

An Elder *must* be married. Some contend that the issue isn’t really about divorce as a restriction for a man being qualified to lead the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27). He *must* be a married man. However, three problems emerge from this unlikely interpretation. First, neither Jesus nor Paul was married. If our Savior and the most significant church elder could serve while being single men, how is it possible that a restriction could be placed on others? Second, how would such a church apply to this interpretation to an elder who was suddenly widowed while serving in leadership? Would he be immediately required to relinquish his leadership position even though Paul argues that singleness serves as a benefit for ministry effectiveness (1 Corinthians 7:1, 8, 32-35)? Third, if such an interpretation is believed, must the elder also be required to have children to fulfill the qualification of managing one’s family? To be consistent, only men who were both married and had children could become elder candidates. For such reasons, this interpretation is highly unlikely.

An Elder may not be married to more than one wife at a time. Some believe that Paul was countering the problem of polygamy in his culture and was not restricting divorce per se, but a man involved in simultaneous, multiple marriages. However, polygamy was not only against Roman law in Paul’s day but was also an extreme rarity among the population in general and certainly not a significant issue in the early church. This interpretation is unlikely in light of the cultural/historical background of the texts.

An Elder may have been divorced but cannot have remarried afterward. This position recognizes the permission that both Jesus and Paul offer regarding *biblical* divorce. The emphasis is placed on the word “one” as a quantitative limiter. Some proponents point to Jesus’ warning about “committing adultery” via remarriage, but misunderstand that Jesus is only speaking about such sin in the case of an illegitimate divorce. A couple who is not biblically justified in ending their marriage, but do so anyways, set one another up to commit adultery if they become involved with another person. However, this limitation for remarriage doesn’t take into account Paul’s declaration that a Christian could be free after a biblically justified divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) and that, in some cases, it was more practical for people to remarry than not (1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39). To hold this position creates confusion, not only for the church’s view of leadership, but also the church’s view of divorce and remarriage. Moreover, if emphasis is put on “can only have been married once” interpretation, this would also limit candidates who have been widowed and chose to remarry—an interpretation not likely intended by the text.

An elder may not have ever been divorced. This is the common historical position. To be sure, the strength of this position is not the interpretation of the phrase “one-woman man” but the tradition of the church. Perhaps because “fault” it’s so difficult to determine in divorce, choosing only never-divorced candidates protects the integrity of the office. Proponents might argue that, because Jesus never rejects His people and the elder serves as a servant of Christ in the church, the elder cannot have participated in divorce, no matter what the circumstances. This conclusion is drawn from Ephesians 5:29-31. However, given the challenges to theological consistency listed above, this position becomes equally difficult. How could a man who was divorced prior to new life in Christ or divorced without fault sometime later, be considered in any way deficient in his leadership qualifications?

As seen above, the precise interpretation of “husband of one wife” is difficult. However, both of Paul’s lists of leadership qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and their surrounding contexts give up more evidence regarding the intended meaning of the phrase.

CLEAR AND CONSISTENT INTERPRETATION

An interpretative possibility not mentioned in the list above is that an elder must be a “one-woman kind of man.” This meaning is set apart from the others in that it understands Paul’s qualification as a *qualitative* one and not *quantitative*. In other words, the elder must have the disposition of faithfulness to his present wife (quality of faithfulness) whether or not he has ever been divorced or married more than once (quantitative evaluation). There are several clues in the text that lend toward this interpretation.

First, all the *other* qualifications Paul lists are qualitative. Notice the list of elder candidate requirements in the list below. Those listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 are indicated in normal font; Those listed in Titus 1:6-9 are indicated in *italics* and placed side-by-side with the corresponding, previous text where appropriate.

above reproach, <i>blameless</i>
the husband of but one wife, <i>the husband of but one wife</i>
Temperate, <i>not quick-tempered</i>
self-controlled, <i>self-controlled</i>
respectable
Hospitable, <i>hospitable</i>
able to teach
not given to drunkenness, <i>not given to drunkenness</i>
not violent but gentle, <i>not violent</i>
not quarrelsome
not a lover of money
He must manage his own family well
His children obey him with proper respect
He must not be a recent convert
He must also have a good reputation with outsiders
<i>Not overbearing</i>
<i>A man whose children believe and not open to charge of being wild</i>
<i>Not pursuing dishonest gain</i>
<i>Loves what is good</i>
<i>Upright</i>
<i>Holy</i>
<i>Disciplined</i>
<i>Must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught and be able to encourage others with it and refute error</i>

None of the other qualifications can be measured merely by frequency. Is a man disqualified if he had been quick tempered once? How about twice or three times over the course of ten years? What if he had an incident of “loving money” a few years ago? What if he didn’t have a good reputation with outsiders at a youth little league game, but it only happened during one season? Surely every person has had times when they were not “holy” or didn’t “manage their family well.” What is the litmus test of whether a man is “able to teach,” is “disciplined,” or is “respectable?” The point is, all of these other qualities are measured by consensus among a nominating committee or congregation. The question is usually asked, “Is the general disposition of this candidate one of temperance, hospitality, maturity, simplicity, sobriety, etc.” The *only* qualification that is debated as being quantitative is the condition of being “the husband of one wife.” So, interpreters must demonstrate a compelling reason for viewing the ambiguous phrase *differently* than all the other qualifications or the qualification should be understood in light of the others—as a general, qualitative disposition.

Second, Paul bookends his list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 with the term “above reproach” or “blameless.” He also mentions the word twice when he writes to Titus (vv. 1:6-7). This qualification is even *more* general than the others. He who is blameless or above reproach has a generally good reputation. There’s no noticeable or significant flaw that would prevent him from leading and having the respect of those he leads. So, when we ask, for example, “How much self-control can a candidate lack before he is disqualified?” the answer is not *quantitative* (i.e., 3 episodes, but no more), but *qualitative* (i.e., Is he generally believed to lack control with his anger, drinking, sarcasm, etc.?). Once again, blamelessness and being above reproach appear to describe all the other requirements in the list. The amount of self-control we expect from a candidate is that which puts him blameless among others.

Third, Paul uses the same metric when qualifying deacons. He commands that deacons “be the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12), a qualitative expectation sandwiched between the overarching command to be “worthy of respect” (v. 8) and maintaining “an excellent standing” (v. 13). Many churches that hold to the traditional no-divorce position don’t hold the same requirement for those serving in the position or office of deacon. They prove that they view the requirement quantitatively in one instance but qualitatively (or worse, irrelevant) for the latter instance.

Finally, when Paul insists on a similar qualification for widows, he most definitely intends it to be qualitatively understood. In 1 Timothy 5:9, Paul writes about adding widows to a list of those who could receive benevolent services from their church: “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband....” Though the Greek construction is the same, many translations write “has been faithful to her husband.” Notice that, though the woman is already widowed, the requirement reflects her *present tense* status. So, she can only be understood to presently be “the wife of one husband” if she had a present reputation of faithfulness—a qualitative distinction.

CONCLUSIONS

Our conclusion is that the qualification “husband of one wife” is not to be read quantitatively, but qualitatively. Does the candidate demonstrate the disposition of faithfulness to his present wife and has he enjoyed a blameless reputation of such fidelity? It’s not a matter of whether he has been divorced—for the Bible gives permission for legitimate divorce in rare circumstances. The question is whether the candidate is honorable in his marriage relationship, seeking to uphold his vows, and faithful to his wife.

To be more specific, we would hold that a candidate who met all the other qualifications *and* had a blameless reputation *could* qualify as an Elder in special instances where the divorce occurred before they placed their faith in Jesus or in cases where they were not at fault in a biblically justifiable divorce.

Having argued this conclusion, we must return to the topic of reputation. To be above reproach is to have a character which is unassailable. Such a man is free from suspicion or accusation. Because divorce is so private, it *is* possible that a candidate who has been biblically divorced and free to remarry might not enjoy the affirmation of the church. In other words, a man may be qualified in actuality, but questions about a divorce that happened 20 years ago may still loom. Such a man may not be able to overcome the appearances which would prevent him from leading. Though the church should seek to work through any questions and uphold the greatest transparency, it is possible that some otherwise-qualified candidates might be prevented from serving because of the question of blamelessness.