

CAN A LEADER BE DIVORCED?
Additional help on the issue of divorce and remarriage
and a lesson in understanding context.
By Greg Lundstedt 2009

Scripture is clear that elders are to be "**the husband of one wife**" (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6). The question then would be, what does the phrase "the husband of one wife" (Greek: *mias gunaikos andra*) mean?

This is an important issue, seeing as certain interpretations of this one qualification have kept many otherwise godly men from being elders. With this in mind, it behooves us to have an accurate biblical understanding of this phrase.

Now most of the qualifications listed for elder are clear and simple to understand, yet there are **many different interpretations** concerning the phrase "the husband of one wife." The following are some of the possibilities:

- a) A man not married to two women at once
- b) A man who is not remarried after death of a spouse or divorce
- c) A man devoted to one woman alone (i.e. his wife)

So then, how can we understand what this phrase "the husband of one wife" means? I believe if we understand three basic areas, we will be able to grasp the meaning of this passage. First, the meaning of *gunaikos* (woman or wife), second, the context of the qualifications for elder and widow (we will see why this is important later), and lastly, misunderstandings of Romans 7.

The Meaning of Gunaikos (woman or wife):

What does *gunaikos* (translated wife in 1 Timothy 3:2) mean? It is consistently translated woman or wife. Now remember context determines the meaning of words. For example, "can" means nothing apart from its context. But in context it derives meaning. "I can walk." "Give me a can of soda." The following passages reveal *gunaikos* is often translated woman.

Some of Jesus' usage of *gunaikos*:

"But I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." Matthew 5:28

"And behold, a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak;" Matthew 9:20

"But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." And at once the woman was made well." Matthew 9:22

"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Matthew 11:11

Some of Paul's usage of *gunaikos* in the very same book as our phrase:

"Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness. Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to

*teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the **woman** being quite deceived, fell into transgression. But **women** shall be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint.*
1Timothy 2:9-14

Again, we need to be careful and remember context determines the meaning. If we were to erroneously substitute wife in any of these passages we would have some grave doctrinal issues to deal with.

Now there are other passages in which *gunaikos* is rightfully translated wife. **Clearly, this word can mean either woman or wife.** Remember, context determines the meaning.

The Context of the qualifications for elder and widow:

The second important area we must address is that the context of 1 Timothy 3:2 and 1 Timothy 5 clearly is **the realm of character for the sake of establishing qualifications.** Take a look at 1 Timothy 3:1-3:

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An 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. (1Timothy 3:1-3)

What do all these characteristics have in common? Character, Christ likeness. This is the context of the phrase translated "the husband of one wife." With this in mind, you could literally translate this phrase "**a one woman man.**" Indeed, this is a literal translation of the Greek.

Now if these were the only passages where this general term is used, we might have a hard time understanding it. However, it is apparent that Paul constantly uses this phrase in the context of character. How can I say this? I thought this and Titus 1 were the only passages with this phrase. Actually, there is one passage that is almost entirely overlooked when discussing this matter. It is a passage in the very same book of 1Timothy which absolutely strengthens this position.

*Honor widows who are widows indeed; but if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. Now she who is a widow indeed, and who has been left alone has fixed her hope on God, and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that **they may be above reproach.** But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been **the wife of one man.** (1Timothy 5:3-9)*

Here is the exact same phrase with the genders switched: "*mias andros gune*" literally a one (*mias*) man (*andros*) woman (*gune*). Literally, the widow is to have been "a one man woman."

Paul continues:

having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet,

*if she has assisted those in distress, and
if she has devoted herself to every good work. (1 Timothy 5:10)*

Notice again Paul is describing character—Christ likeness

Paul continues:

But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. And at the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.
(1 Timothy 5:11-16)

Did you catch that? Paul commands the younger widows to get remarried. Now if "*widows indeed*" are to be "*the wife of one man*," this cannot mean married once. If it did, Paul would be a hypocrite for commanding younger widows to get remarried. It is, in context, a character issue relating to qualification as a "*widow indeed*". Widows who were to receive help from the church were to have godly character, they were to be one man women, i.e. they were devoted to one man only, their husbands.

Let me explain with a question. If a younger widow remarried, as Paul commanded, and her new husband also died, would she be disqualified from being put on the list because she was not the wife of one husband? Of course not! That is not the intent. **In context, it is character issue: was she a "one man woman?"**

The same is true for elders – Is he a "**one woman man?**" It is a character issue relating to qualifications.

Ray Stedman correctly writes:

"He is to be a 'one-woman man,' literally. It says, 'the husband of one wife.' This sounds like he is to have been married only once. Many have struggled over this passage because sometimes elders' wives die and elders remarry, or elders are divorced for some reason and remarry. This has given rise to a lot of controversy. But the word basically means that an elder is to be a one-woman man, i.e., not a philanderer, not attracted to every skirt that walks down the street, not constantly eyeing somebody or someone else's wife. It is to be very evident that an elder is committed to one woman, his wife, whom he loves."

So then, it is clear that the phrase, "*husband of one wife*" literally means in context, "a one woman man," a man devoted to one woman only, his wife.

Misunderstandings of Romans 7:

As we have seen, one would still be a "one woman man" if a spouse died and he was to remarry and be devoted to her alone. **What about divorce?** Some use Romans 7 to say death is the only biblical grounds for remarriage. Is this biblical? In a word: no. Why can I say this? Let's look at Romans 7:

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? 2 For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. 3 So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to

another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man. (Romans 7:1-3)

In this passage, Paul uses the illustration of marriage to make what point? Death releases the Jew from the Law (See vs. 2).

Romans 7 gives one argument for release for remarriage. Let us call it Argument A (Death).

If you look at the context, honest interpreters will agree **Paul is clearly not teaching about marriage and divorce, he is only using it as an illustration. This is crucial to understand!**

To be an honest, faithful interpreter, we must always use the specific passages to interpret other passages, which are not specifically teaching on that subject. Otherwise, we will err in our interpretation and hurt many people.

We must use passages that teach specifically about divorce (Matthew 5 & 19, 1 Corinthians 7) to interpret passages that do not (Romans 7). If we do not do this we will error. It is my belief that anyone who uses Romans 7 to interpret Matthew 5 and 19 or 1 Corinthians 7 is in error.

Romans 7 does give us good truth about remarriage after the death of a spouse, but this is only one piece of the puzzle. In 1 Corinthians 7, it is clear that desertion by unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15) releases a spouse to remarry and there is no sin (1 Corinthians 7:28).

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches. (1 Corinthians 7:15-17)

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. (1 Corinthians 7:27-28)

Now obviously verse 27 and the beginning of 28 are not speaking of virgins as some erroneously say. Clearly, we see two possibilities: the released one remarrying and the virgin marrying. Notice we have two separate subjects. "You" referring to the bound or released one and "a virgin." Both are free to marry without sin.

It is clear in context that the released one (7:27) has been released through the desertion of an unbelieving spouse (7:15). But in 7:39, we see, as in Romans 7, a spouse is also released and free to remarry if a spouse dies.

So then we have two biblical reasons so far for release from the marriage bond, which opens the way for remarriage: Argument B (desertion by unbelieving spouse) and Argument A (death).

Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 give the last reason (Argument C) for divorce, which is unchastity or immorality (*pornea*).

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, **except for the cause of unchastity**, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:32)

*And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, **except for immorality**, and marries another woman commits adultery. (Matthew 19:9)*

Conversely, it is obvious that **if the innocent spouse remarries** in the case of immorality **they do not commit adultery**.

So then we have the three biblical, but extremely unfortunate, grounds for the breaking of the marriage bond and then remarriage. Argument A (death), Argument B (desertion by unbelieving spouse), and Argument C (immorality).

Now just because Argument A (death: Romans 7) is true does not mean Argument B (desertion by unbelieving spouse) and Argument C (immorality) are not true.

Again, **we must use passages that teach specifically about divorce (Matthew 5 and 19, 1 Corinthians 7) to interpret passages that do not (Romans 7)**. If we do not do this we will error. Therefore, we interpret Romans 7 in light of Matthew 5 & 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 and not the opposite.

In conclusion, we have seen that the qualification for an elder being a "*husband of one wife*" literally means a "one woman man" and speaks of a character trait, not specifically marital status. A man may be an elder even if he is divorced only if he meets the biblical qualifications. Thus, if divorced after becoming a Christian, his divorce must be on biblical grounds, as we spoke above, or he would be disqualified.

With this in mind, **in conclusion**, I want to share a portion from the elders at Valley Bible Church:

"The husband of one wife literally means 'a one woman man' or 'a one wife husband.' This does not forbid unmarried men from serving as elders (Paul himself was not married). It means that if the man is married, he must be devoted to his wife. It speaks of a spiritual character trait like the rest of the qualifications. If the man is unmarried, he must be the kind of person who would commit to one woman and not be found flirtatious. There must not be any adulterous actions or attitudes present in his life. A man is not automatically eliminated from eldership by a divorce in his past, recognizing that if he was a believer during the divorce, this divorce must meet the biblical qualifications of immorality or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse discussed earlier. The qualifications are not emphasized by what the man's character may have been in the past but rather what his character is currently.