

Can an Elder have been divorced?

Perhaps the most debated qualification for elder is that he be ‘the husband of one wife.’

Literally this says he must be “a one-woman man” (*mias gunaikos andra*), and we should note that this requirement is mentioned in both passages (1 Tim 3:1-9; Titus 1:5-9) stating the qualifications for elder, and in the passage stating the qualifications for deacon (1 Tim. 3:12). Debate rages over this passage. Does it exclude those from eldership who are divorced?

There are three main position on this issue, which get progressively narrower:

1. This prohibits only polygamy (one woman at a time). Wayne Grudem holds that because polygamy and immorality were practiced, Paul is saying that one with multiple wives or mistresses is forbidden from the office (1994:917).

2. This prohibits divorce and polygamy (one living woman). Charles Ryrie holds that Paul is prohibiting both those who have mistresses/extra wives, and those who have been involved in divorce and remarriage, both of which were realities in NT times (1999:481).

3. This prohibits divorce, polygamy, and remarriage (one woman ever). This view, held by commentator and Patristics scholar J.N.D. Kelly (1998:75-76), says that Paul is prohibiting remarriage for any reason whatsoever. Thus remarrying after the death of your wife excludes you from eldership.

Evaluation

This is a complicated issue, and we can’t pontificate on it, but here are some thoughts:

(1) In most western societies Polygamy is not practiced or even legal any more. Some note that the background of the passage is not western, and therefore argue that this relates to polygamy only. This seems to make sense in Africa, for example, where polygamy is a reality and many men struggle with the desire to gain status through more than one wife.

(2) The problem with this, is that polygamy was forbidden by Roman law (Getz 1989:146). Hence the passage probably isn’t referring to polygamy (the possession of more than one wife) proper.

(3) However, concubines were a regular part of Roman life, as were mistresses. Hence Getz (1989:146) concludes that Paul is referring to extramarital relationships of any kind. In other words, this is a general requirement that the man is to be above reproach in faithfulness to his wife.

(4) If one accepts this, does the passage have any relation at all to divorce? The objection is normally that it is not fair to punish someone forever for one mistake. While the passage likely was not written primarily to speak to the issue of divorce, we should note that at least one other requirement—*having believing children who are not wild or unruly*—also seems to be of a more lasting nature. Moreover, one is probably more in control over marriage than of whether or not children become believers. Hence we probably should be careful about using this verse as a once-for-all proof text on divorce and eldership, but in the end it may prohibit divorced

elders in principle.

(5) However, Grudem ably makes the point that “all the other qualifications listed by Paul refer to a man’s *present status*, not his *entire past life*. For example 1 Tim. 3:1-7 does not mean ‘one who has *never* been violent’ but ‘one who is not *now* violent’ but gentle. It does not mean ‘one who has *never* been a lover of money, but ‘one who his not *now* a lover of money’.

(6) We should also note that there are infinite complexities to this issue. How does this relate to divorce before one becomes a believer? What about a 1 Corinthians 7 situation, where a believer is abandoned by his unbelieving spouse? Is divorce OK so long as he is not remarried? Or if the divorce is allowable, is remarriage allowable? What do you tell the African church leader who had three wives when he became a Christian? Which ones should he expel? Is it OK to become an elder if a man did not divorce his wife, but had an affair? What if his unfaithfulness was before marriage? Does a pornography problem exclude one from being a one woman man?

Now...just because obedience to a command is difficult or complex, doesn’t mean it’s not a command. Nevertheless, I think the complexities show us that it is difficult to make this a rigid requirement unless we go all the way on everything: No remarriage for any reason, and unfaithfulness of any kind at any time prohibits one from eldership. And I’m not sure that is what Paul intended.

It is interesting that though Paul has some very specific ‘not’s in his list of requirements (not a drunkard, not quarrelsome, not violent, not greedy) he does not say ‘not divorced’ nor does he say ‘having been married only once’. Perhaps the reason is that like some other things about elders (i.e. the exact job that they do; their number, etc) Paul is leaving things general because that is best. Thus it may be best to see this as a general requirement that an elder be known as someone who over the years has shown loving commitment to his wife.

(6) What about Kelly’s idea that a man not be remarried for any reason, including the death of his wife? Kelly takes his position from 1 Timothy 5:9, where Paul says “let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than 60 years of age, having been the wife of one husband.” Kelly argues that “the wife of one husband” here clearly means not remarried after divorce or death, and points out that the words here are the exact feminine equivalent of husband of one wife (literally “a one man woman”). This is a powerful argument, but I think there are a couple of factors that argue against it. First, this would make the requirement completely about marital status, and not about marital fidelity. I say this because that is certainly how Kelly sees 1 Tim. 5:9 functioning. However, since Paul’s comments about the elder relate to character, I think it’s safe to say that his main point is about fidelity and could relate to the character flaws that a divorce might betray rather than only relating to marital status. Secondly, it is possible that the requirement in 1 Tim. 5:9 is also about fidelity. In other words, it is possible that Paul is saying to enroll only widows who were known as faithful to their husbands. At first the following context seems to suggest otherwise, for Paul speaks of younger widows because “when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to remarry.” However, Paul goes on to advise the younger widows *to* remarry. The point is that it is not the remarriage that is bad, but the

breaking of a vow of widowhood. Thus Paul may not be stipulating for older widows that they never have been remarried, but rather that they were faithful to their marriage or marriages. And he is probably suggesting the same thing for the elder.

(7) We should also note something else: Does this *require* that a man be **married** before he can be an elder? Some would say yes. Ryrie (1999:481) argues that this does indeed mean that a man has to be currently married, so that even a faithful widower who has only been married once (the kind J.N.D. Kelly would say is quite qualified [1998:75-76]. i.e. one who is like Paul) but is not married because he is widowed is NOT qualified. Is this true? Perhaps, we should be careful about turning prohibitions on this list into positives. Otherwise we might look at the other requirements and conclude that to be an elder a man must have children and must drink wine.

Conclusion. Perhaps one of the most well rounded statements on this comes from the website of Henderson Hills Baptist Church (s.v. "The 21 Qualifications of Elders"). They conclude that Paul's requirement "speaks to the subject of fidelity in marriage, not to marital status" and that "this phrase addressed fidelity in marriage, not divorce." However, they go on to say "we should not assume from this that divorce is inconsequential or insignificant...When selecting an elder or deacon, a divorce should be seen as a 'red flag' in the candidate's past. Since an elder must be a good steward of his family, a recent divorce disqualifies a man from serving as an elder. However, divorce is not the unpardonable sin. For example, a man may have divorced many years ago. Since then, he may have remarried and lived an exemplary and mature Christian life. This man may now enjoy a godly marriage, raising children who love the Lord. When we take this man's total life experience into consideration, the divorce should not disqualify him from consideration as an elder or deacon. However, if the divorce was recent, or if there is any question about his relationship to his wife or leadership of his family, the man must not be considered for appointment."

Bibliography

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