

# The Husband of one wife

1 Tim. 3:2, 12 - Feb. 22, 2003

Elders,

Dear Brothers:

The above mentioned scripture is very important to the success and growth of any church because it helps to define who the elders and deacons will be. And it is an obvious fact that any church is only as spiritual as its leaders and only as big as the vision of its leaders. This qualification is as important as any of the others. They must all be understood and applied correctly for the church to be the kind of family that the Lord desires. But this verse is not as easy to understand as some of the others. I have only given special attention to it just the last few weeks. As my elders I now ask your advise and help in ensuring that I have a correct understanding of it.

In the following comments I have referred only to the elder, but of course, everything said about this verse also applies to the deacon because the same expression is used in verse 12 to refer to the deacon. All these thoughts represent my thinking as of now. I am open to new evidence and I would appreciate your comments, if this thinking is wrong. Please be frank in showing me any fallacies you see and any evidence on this subject that I have not considered. Thank you for your time.

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Elders and deacons must be "the husband of one wife." Does the language of this verse allow for several interpretations? Let us look at the language and evidence to arrive at an answer. The literal translation of this phrase is "of one wife husband." As you can see there is no verb in this expression, it is just a predicate adjective, i.e. a phrase in the predicate that modifies the subject (elder, v.2). This phrase alone has no time constraints, it doesn't tell us "when" Paul requires this to be true. From this phrase we can know nothing about when the apostle means for the qualification to be applied. The time comes only from the verb in the sentence, "to be." The Greek (and the English) is in the present tense. The present tense describes when the predicate adjective is to be operative. The English present tense, as well as the Greek, gives us no indication that the qualification should be applied to a time in the past. It only speaks of a current, and continuing, condition. This is, of course, also true of all the other conditions which are covered by this same present tense verb i.e. the other qualifications. The other predicate adjectives (see below) have the same rules of time applied to them. Those conditions are required only for present (and continuing forward) time. The verbs are highlighted and underlined.

- An elder "**must be** 1) above reproach, 2) the husband of one wife, 3) temperate, 4) self-controlled, 5) respectable, 6) hospitable, 7) able to teach, 8) not given to drunkenness, 9) not violent but gentle, 10) not quarrelsome, 11) not a lover of money.
- 12) He **must manage** his own family well
- 13) and **see** that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)
- 14) He **must not be** a recent convert,  
or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.
- 15) He **must also have** a good reputation with outsiders,  
so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap."

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Which of these 15 restrictions can be required of the prospective elder's past, except that these characteristics have to have been displayed long enough to be recognized as such, and be firmly established in the individual who is to be an Elder. Who would say that this passage requires that the prospective elder has to have been "above reproach, temperate, self-controlled, hospitable, **etc.**" for his entire adult life for him to be qualified to be an Elder? No one! To prove this point absolutely, consider the qualification that he "must not be a novice." How could this qualification be applied to his entire adult life, because EVERYONE was at some time a novice. But the time and duration of his not being a novice is controlled or governed by the same present tense verb as all the rest. By what evidence, logical or scriptural, can we pluck out the one qualification, i.e. "the husband of one wife" and say that this one qualification must be applied to the entire past married life of the individual under consideration?

The passage is simply saying that for a man to be considered for the eldership he must currently have all these qualifications **and have had them long enough to be recognized as an integral part of his personality and character.** Please consider the following examples:

**1)** A man living in paganism, having several wives. After the proper study he decides to become a Christian. Learning the laws of Jesus about marriage he learns that he must give up all but one of his wives. This is very difficult for all concerned, but he does it. After maturing in the faith and leading many others from paganism to Christ over many years, he is considered for the eldership. He meets all the other qualifications. Would he be disqualified because he at one time was "not the husband of one wife," but in reality, was the husband of several wives before becoming a Christian? If so, by what logical or scriptural evidence is this conclusion reached?

**2)** A young Christian man and a young Christian woman fall in love and marry. They continue faithfully in the church and grow spiritually, but after a few years she contracts cancer and dies. After the appropriate mourning time he meets another Christian woman, falls in love with and marries her. After many years they have a family, and continue to grow spiritually. Having met all the other qualifications for an elder, should he be disqualified because he has, in his lifetime, been married to two different women? After all, in his entire married life he has always been "the husband of one wife." Never, in his entire life, has he been the husband of more than one wife.

**3)** A faithful Christian couple. But over the years the wife becomes unhappy. For whatever reasons she is unfaithful to her husband. He finds out and divorces her for a scriptural reason. Over time he meets another Christian woman and falls in love with and marries her. Over many years he grows in the faith and meets all the other qualifications for an elder, should he be disqualified because he has, in his lifetime, been married to two different women? After all, in his entire married life he has always been "the husband of one wife." Never, even in his entire life has he been the husband of two or more wives. What are the differences between examples 2 & 3?

I conclude that all three examples are easily answered by recognizing that the tense of the verb which tells us about the time frame of the qualification is a present tense infinitive. **NONE** of the qualifications of elders reaches back in time to mean that the person must have always had these qualifications, else no one would qualify.

If the above is true then why **did** Paul write that an elder must be "the husband of one wife?" For three reasons: 1) to prohibit a current polygamist from serving, and 2) to prohibit someone living in an adulteress "marriage" from serving, 3) and to ensure that unmarried men cannot serve.

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## A modern Parable:

The I.R.S., in it's infinite wisdom, decided it would give a tax credit to certain individuals. In order to qualify for this tax credit a person "must be the owner of but one house." Would anyone not understand this restriction? Does this mean that a non-homeowner could qualify?? Does this mean that a person who owned two house five years ago, but now only one (the other one having been sold legally), could not qualify? Does this mean that a person who has owned several houses, but always one at a time (and each one sold legally) , could not qualify?? If we decide to follow the rules of the I.R.S. how would we understand this restriction?

Do these sentences all have the same meaning??

- 1) You must be the owner of but one house.
- 2) You must have always been the owner of but one house?
- 3) You must have always been the owner of the same house?

Some may think that the language of the N.T. is different. That we must apply special rules of grammar when understanding the N.T. This is not correct. When the Greek scholars translated the English N.T. they used the normal , regular rules of grammar, else we could not understand anything. If we make up our own rules of grammar and logic in order to get out the meaning we want, how is that different than all the denominations of the world, who say that Acts 2:38 does not mean what it says.

It has been said that this qualification only infers that the prospective elder must have the moral character to be devoted to only one woman. And that if an elder's wife dies he is still qualified because he still has this moral character. This inference of moral character is obviously correct, but to say that these words "only" mean such a moral character is denying the meaning of the actual words "must be the husband of one wife." If Paul had only meant the elder must have a moral character exemplified by the trait of being devoted to one woman without reference to being married, he would have said that. It is true that words have inferences, but their inferences never negate the meaning of the actual words. For example: the inference of baptism is that we are dedicating our life to God. Can we say that we don't need to follow the words that tell us to be baptized as long as we are "dedicated" to God? Likewise we cannot ignore the meaning of the words "the husband of one wife" just because we may possess the quality inferred (moral character of being devoted to one woman) by those words. Therefore, if at any time an elder is in the position of not being "the husband of one wife" he is no longer qualified to be an elder.

Even if someone wanted to mistakenly apply "must be ...the husband of one wife" to a prospective elder's entire past married life, it would not disqualify the men in examples 2 and 3, above, because in each case the men were always, at all times, the "husband of one wife." If Paul had wanted to have the qualification extend back in time to include all his past relationships, he could easily have chosen to use one of the following expressions:

"An elder must,

- 1) always have been married to the same woman," or
- 2) have been married to only one woman," or
- 3) have been married only once," or
- 4) have the same wife that he has always had," or
- 5) have always been the husband of one wife." etc.

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But he did not so choose. Instead the Holy Spirit inspired him to say "must be ... the husband of one wife..." If the Bible is complete, as 2 Tim. 3:16 says, then we must make our decisions based on what the Book says, and only on what the book says.

On the other hand if Paul had wanted to state that he was only concerned about the current status of a person's spiritual life and eliminate those who currently had more than one wife or no wife, and those who were in an adulterous relationship, what would he have said?? Maybe something like "an elder must be ... the husband of one wife," using the present tense verb.

Acts 17:11b .....ccb