

The Husband of One Wife, Part 2

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As all of you know, our congregation recently spent a great deal of time considering the subject of the eldership. Specifically, the elders asked us to consider whether John could continue to serve as an elder even though his wife has recently passed on. They indicated that if John remaining on as an elder would cause division in the church, they would step down. At the end of that two-week period of study, no one had told the elders that they would be forced to leave the Joliet church if the eldership continued. Because of that, Joe and John concluded that they could and should remain on.

However, that study has left some of us with a number of questions. Ideally, the elders would like everyone here to be comfortable with the Biblical support for John remaining an elder. In consequence, they asked me to prepare another lesson on the subject of what it means that an elder is to be the husband of one wife. This is that lesson.

Because just about everyone here was present for the first sermon on the subject, I'm not going to re-hash all of the arguments that I made in that first sermon. Instead, I'm going to concentrate on the questions that I know exist, the questions that were raised to me and to the elders. Let's look this evening at "the husband of one wife", part 2.

Problems With "Must Be Married"

As I indicated in the last sermon, there are a number of different positions that people hold on this issue, but I'm only aware of one of them that would require John to resign as elder. That position holds that in order to serve as an elder, a man must be married throughout his entire term of service. This is an appealing view in many ways. However, there are a number of problems with this view that require us to discount it.

First, it doesn't have a good answer for why the qualifications for elder specify "one" wife. We see an example of this wording in 1 Timothy 3:2. Although this reads very normally to us, it is not the way that the marriage relationship is normally described in Scripture. In fact, the only places in the New Testament that specify one spouse are all qualification texts: both texts that describe the qualifications for an elder, the deacon qualifications later on in 1 Timothy 3, and the qualifications for a widow indeed in 1 Timothy 5. We don't see that language anywhere else in the entire Bible.

For a couple of examples of typical husband-and-wife language, let's turn to another letter written by Paul, 1 Corinthians. Let's look specifically at 1 Corinthians 7:2. This is very typical. If we do a concordance search on "his wife" in the New Testament, we'll get dozens of hits. We find the second most common wording in 1 Corinthians 7:27. Here, and in about a dozen other places, the Scripture speaks of "a wife". That's Paul describing the marriage relationship.

Now, when we turn to the qualifications and start seeing "one wife" pop up, the only reasonable conclusion we can draw is that Paul isn't just describing the state of marriage. Otherwise, he would have used the same language from 1 Corinthians 7. Instead, he is focusing on the number one. Whatever else this text is about, it's not just zeroing in on a woman. It's emphasizing one woman, as opposed to two or three. Any good interpretation of this passage must address that. However, if all we say is that this passage is about being married, we're missing the significance of "one" entirely.

Second, if we read "husband of one wife" as being only about marital status, we create contextual problems. Notice that in the list of qualifications that begins in 1 Timothy 3:2, the first word is "blameless". That's not just coincidence. In fact, we do well if we treat "blameless" like a subject heading. "Blameless" is the general kind of character that the elder must have, and all of the other qualifications are specific attributes that add up to blamelessness. They're subpoints. This reading of the texts works extremely well in both 1 Timothy and Titus—unless we treat "husband of one wife" as just requiring marriage. As we all know, the simple fact of a man's marriage says next to nothing about his character. We've all known single men who were righteous and married men who were scoundrels. It doesn't establish the blamelessness of the prospective elder one way or the other. That leaves us with two options. Either the Holy Spirit is a bad writer, and put this irrelevant characteristic in the middle of His list describing blamelessness, or that phrase is actually about blamelessness, and it requires something other than merely that the elder must be married.

Third, if we read "husband of one wife" only as requiring marriage, nothing in the qualifications of the elder requires him to be sexually moral. There is nothing else in the qualifications that speaks to the issue of sexual continence. That seems like a big oversight to me. Why would that be? One might argue that the elder qualifications aren't concerned with details, but is that really the case? Let's look at 1 Timothy 3:3. Here, among other things, we see Paul warn that the elder must not be violent. I've known few if any Christian men who were violent at all. This is a very specific, very niche qualification. On the other hand, could it be that sexual morality is such a basic qualification that we're just meant to assume it's there? However, we can't make that line up with the text either. In this same verse, we see that the elder is not to be greedy for money. That's not a niche sin. In fact, I daresay that just as many people will wind up in hell for covetousness and love of money as will be lost for sexual immorality. If we were expected to understand that the elder should be sexually moral, why didn't God also expect us to understand that he should be free from the love of money?

Basically, if we take “husband of one wife” as referring only to marital status, then the requirement of sexual morality that by any logic should be present just isn’t there. Once again, this leaves us with two choices. Either we must argue that the Holy Spirit is a bad writer and just forgot to put it in, or “husband of one wife” isn’t just about marriage.

Fourth, if we read “husband of one wife” as requiring the elder to be married throughout his term of service, we’re almost certainly not being consistent in our reading of the text. To highlight the problem with this, let’s look together at 1 Timothy 3:4. As this text makes clear, the elder must prove his leadership abilities by managing his household well and keeping his children in subjection. If we want to argue that “husband of one wife” must be true throughout the elder’s entire term of service, then we must also argue that the elder must be managing his children well throughout his entire term of service. In other words, in order to serve as an elder, a man must still have children at home and they must exhibit submission to his leadership. Once those children leave home, he is no longer qualified to serve as an elder. Joe, for instance, would have to step down because his kids don’t live with him anymore.

Brethren, I think everyone here would recognize that as an argument that’s just plain goofy. We would all agree that we don’t have to see a man in the middle of raising children to recognize him as a good leader. Instead, we can look to what he’s done in the past to see what leadership abilities he still possesses today. Even though neither John nor Joe have children living at home anymore, the faithful lives those children lead today show what kind of leadership they had from their fathers. Now, friends, if we can learn what kind of a father a man is by what he did in the past, we can also learn what kind of a husband he is by what he did in the past. He doesn’t have to be married now to prove that.

Problems with “Must Have Wife’s Counsel”

Nor do the logical problems with the “an elder must be married” argument end there. Most people who hold that position also hold the position that the elder must have his wife’s counsel and support to be effective. However, there are plenty of problems with that sub-view too. First, there is nothing in Scripture that necessarily implies it. As I mentioned in the first sermon, people often find support for this position in 1 Timothy 3:11. As I’ve told a couple of you privately, this is a difficult text, but I do think it’s most likely that it refers to the wives of church officers. However, what about this verse leads us to the conclusion that elders’ and deacons’ wives are supposed to play a necessary role in the work of their husbands? It gives qualifications for them, true, but it’s at least as likely that those qualifications are intended to show a man’s leadership capability. After all, if a man can’t lead his wife to be righteous, he almost certainly isn’t going to be able to lead an entire church to be righteous either. There’s really nothing in the text that leads us to prefer one explanation over another. The “must have wife’s counsel” argument is on shaky ground to start with.

This position isn’t improved any by the complete silence of any other verse in Scripture concerning the work of elders’ wives. There’s a fair amount of teaching about what elders are supposed to do. There are a couple of examples of elders at work. However, nowhere in this body of text are elders’ wives even mentioned. Look, for instance at 1 Peter 5:1-3. Peter, of course, is an elder. He’s advising his fellow elders. Now, if the advice and support of a wife is absolutely necessary to the work of an elder, so that they can’t do that work without it, isn’t it reasonable that Peter would encourage other elders to lean on the advice and support of their wives? Yet, he doesn’t even bring the topic up.

Likewise in the examples of elders at work in the book of Acts. We see the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church meeting together to deliberate in Acts 15:5-6. They reach their decision in Acts 15:22. In between, they consult the Scripture and the wisdom of apostles like Peter and Paul and James. Know whom they don’t consult? They don’t consult their wives. Apparently, they could make this far-reaching decision about circumcision without any input from the women that some say are necessary to the work of the eldership. What happened here? Did the apostolic elders of the Jerusalem church get the decision-making process wrong, or were their wives actually not all that important to it?

We see a similar absence in Paul’s farewell address to the Ephesian elders. We see the original summons in Acts 20:17-18. Paul wants to talk to these elders so badly that he summons them to leave Ephesus and come to him. Notice who’s not part of the summons and not part of the audience? The elders’ wives. Likewise, look at Acts 20:28. Paul doesn’t say anything here about how the elders are to lean on their wives to shepherd the flock. Instead, he places the entire responsibility squarely on the men before him. Let’s be honest here, brethren. If Paul thought that the elders of the first century could bear that burden by themselves, who are we to say that elders today cannot bear it?

In addition, it’s interesting to me that almost all of the people who hold this position will extend it to say that an elder whose wife is incapacitated must also step down. Let’s think about that for a second. What it says is that they don’t actually hold the “elders must be married throughout their service” position either. According to their way of thinking, there are men who are still the husbands of one wife who are nonetheless not qualified to serve as elders.

In other words, just about anybody on any side of this discussion doesn’t believe that “husband of one wife” should be taken at face value, because doing so leads to an irrational conclusion. It leads to the conclusion that a man who is married to a brain-dead woman who does nothing to help him is qualified to be an elder, but just as soon as that brain-dead woman takes her last breath, he ceases to be qualified. That makes no sense, and everybody knows it.

The reason, then, why some take this “must have wife’s counsel” position has to do with worldview. From our 21st-century perspective, from a country where most people believe women are equal to men in every respect, it makes sense to us that an elder should have to lean on his wife as a partner in his work. However, I can confidently say that that reasoning would not have made sense to our brethren in the first century. Remember, friends, just what the standing of women was in Jewish and Roman society. At the time of Christ, the Pharisees actively discouraged fathers from teaching their daughters about the Law. One rabbi said that if a man taught his daughter the Torah, it was just as bad as teaching her to be sexually immoral. In the Jewish court system, the testimony of women was inadmissible as evidence, because the Jews believed that women were too irrational to make good witnesses. In Roman society, a woman could not manage her own property before she was married or even during marriage. Now, of course, the law of Christ changed the status of women greatly, but we must remember that when we are talking about our brethren in the first century, we are talking about men who were raised with and shared this massive societal prejudice against women. They might have incorporated their wives into the decision-making process if the apostles told them to, but the apostles didn’t. To men of the first century, the idea that an elder of the church needed the wisdom of his wife to do his work would have been laughable. Why, then, are we so determined that every one of our elders today needs his wife to do his work?

A Better Reading

What we need, then, if we want to be true to the Scripture, is a better reading of “husband of one wife”. We can find that better reading in the Greek, when we realize that it’s just as legitimate to translate that phrase as “man of one woman”. In other words, the elder must be a one-woman man. When we read the text this way, it doesn’t just address his yes-no marital status. Instead, it becomes an inquiry into his monogamy and fidelity.

This gives us four logical advantages over the “must always be married” position. First of all, it explains the presence of the word “one” in the phrase we’ve been talking about this whole time. According to this reading, God is saying He doesn’t want a two-woman man in the eldership, whether that be a man who keeps a girlfriend on the side or who is unscripturally divorced. Men like that aren’t elder material. Instead, an elder must be a man who is loyal to his wife for as long as their marriage lasts. Her death doesn’t change his character or his faithfulness.

Second, “man of one woman” fits in logically as a subheading under the overall heading of “blameless”. We easily understand that for a man to be above reproach, he can’t be unfaithful to his wife. Third, if we start talking about “man of one woman” instead of “husband of one wife”, that gives us the qualification pertaining to sexual morality that was so obviously missing from the qualifications as we read them before. A man who’s a one-woman man can’t be sexually immoral. Finally, because one-woman man is a character trait, not a marital state, it is something that a man can establish and be known for even after he is widowed. Just like we’re able to look back on his time as a father and judge him for his managerial ability, we’re able to look back on his time as a husband and judge him for his faithfulness.

Now, at this point, I know there are some folks here concerned about whether they can trust their English Bibles because we had to go back to the Greek to figure this one out. I said I would talk about that, but I just don’t have the time in this sermon. I cut a whole bunch of stuff I wanted to talk about, and it’s still 50 percent longer than any other sermon I’ve ever preached here. Next week, however, I promise I will devote an entire sermon to the subject.

Real-World Implications.

Before I close, though, I want to spend a few minutes discussing the real-world implications of the decisions we make about this. It’s easy for us to get caught up in abstract Scriptural discussion without considering the consequences, but if we do that, it’s likely to be dangerous and even deadly. To understand why, let’s begin by exploring the work of the elder as defined by Hebrews 13:17. The work that Joe and John do for us isn’t about chairing leadership meetings or deciding on the church budget. It’s watching over the souls of the congregation. I work pretty closely with them, but even I don’t know all that they do. I will tell you this, though: from what I’ve seen, I am confident that there are members of this church who are faithful today who would have fallen away without the shepherding of the elders. I am confident that if they continue to serve, they will continue to rescue sheep who would otherwise have gone astray. That means that if we ask them to step down as elders, if we deny them the chance to continue watching over our souls, then it is nearly certain that some of those souls will be lost simply because we don’t have elders anymore.

Along these lines, then, let’s pay special attention to Luke 17:1. Here’s the way this plays out. If God’s word does require our eldership to dissolve, and we ask the elders to step down, and souls are lost as a result, well, that’s tragic, but that’s the way things have to be. On the other hand, if God’s word is OK with our eldership continuing, but we handle the word wrongly, and we ask our elders to step down anyway, and souls are lost because we were wrong, what then? On the day of judgment, if that’s what we do, what is God going to say to us? I’m not trying to discourage anyone from doing what they believe is right here. I’m just saying that if I had questions about the eldership’s validity, I would have to be very, VERY sure of myself before I sought the eldership’s dissolution. The stakes are just too high.