

Essay 6: "Husband of One Wife:" A Plain Reading of 1 Tim 3:2

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1 Tim 3 is a highly contested passage in the deliberations over ordaining women. Verses 1-2 have especially been the focus of much verbal vexation from both sides of the debate. In my view, this is because both groups are trying to force the text to address a question that Paul was not even considering.

A key point of contention is the nature of the qualification that the elder be "the husband of one wife." GE advocates thunder that this phrase definitively requires the elder be male for a woman cannot be a husband. For them, this is the "plain reading" of the text. GI proponents offer a variety of interpretations, which I shall not cover in detail, except to say that some of their proposals appear to treat Paul's counsel as culturally conditioned, and thus is in need of updating to our culture, or that Paul was addressing a local matter which is not universal. I, and a number of other GI advocates, would agree with our GE colleagues that, at best, such arguments are inadequate or, at worst, problematic. Other GI advocates argue that Paul is presenting the highest ideals, but that not every elder will meet every exact qualification. Thus, the church can act prudently to get the best, though not ideally qualified person appointed as elder. In such a view, even if a male elder was ideal, circumstances may permit a woman to be an elder when there is a shortage of adequate males in the church. While there may be some truth to the ideal-vs-pragmatic point, there can be a certain discomfort as well, first because this argument may be easily massaged to suggest we can settle for second-best with divine approval, and second, the possibility of treating a woman elder as permissible but second-best seems demeaning. In contrast to these options, I am proposing there is an alternate option which I believe is the plainest reading of this text.

### **Man-Woman or Husband-Wife?**

The first step in pursuing the plain reading of this text is to take note of the vocabulary used by Paul. In Greek, the respective words Paul uses in this passage for "husband" and for "wife" can also be general terms denoting a man and a woman. Our first challenge, therefore, is to determine if Paul meant the church elder should be monogamously married (husband of one wife) or if he meant something broader (a man of one woman). That Paul functioned as a clergyman while unmarried, and perhaps Timothy and Titus as well,<sup>1</sup> suggests that Paul did not intend this qualification to exclude single men from consideration as an elder. This potential tension between Paul's

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<sup>1</sup>The Bible has no record of Titus or Timothy being married. The allusions to their young age, and their flexibility to travel with Paul without record of being accompanied by a wife (as of Peter in 1 Cor 9), might imply they were single while working with Paul. If so, like Paul, this singleness would suggest that Paul did not intend his comments to be understood as a hard requirement that pastors and elders be married.

personal example and his instruction in 1 Tim 3 should not be glossed over lightly. If Paul did not practice the counsels he wrote under inspiration it would raise serious questions about the authority of his counsels, both in this passage and elsewhere. Thus, in order maintain that Paul's example did not contradict his counsel, it seems prudent to favor the broader reading (a man of one woman) instead of the more restricted marriage reading (husband of one wife).

### **The Whole Phrase**

Another foundational point is that in the sentence structure, "man" is not an isolated qualification. Paul's syntax does not read, "the elder should be a man." (Note the period ending the sentence at man). Rather, "man" is part of a larger phrase and we must determine the meaning of the phrase *as a whole*, not splitting off one word in isolation from the phrase in which it functions. Let me illustrate the potential problem.

Suppose I am returning home to the United States and I see a sign in the Customs area saying, "If anyone desires to use this line, he must be an American diplomat." (Note that I am mimicking the argument structure of 1 Tim 3:1a, 2a). If I separate the word "diplomat" off of the phrase "American diplomat," the ensuing revision entirely changes the meaning of the sentence, for it would read, "If anyone desires to use this line, he must be an American." Any passenger making such a revision would wrongly interpret the message to mean that any American, and only Americans, could use that line. In reality, the message was crafted with the intent of communicating that this line is intended only for DIPLOMATS, who are also American. Not interpreting a phrase as a whole can fundamentally alter the meaning derived from the sentence.

In repeated interactions with advocates of the GE view, there is an implicit revision of the text, for it is interpreted as if Paul had simply written that the elder "must be a man." They act like "man" is the whole phrase. Such license with the text likely alters the fundamental meaning of Paul's whole phrase from what Paul intended. The probability is that Quasi-Paul reappears as a cloak to clothe personal preference with biblical authority. Let us, therefore, examine the phrase *as a whole* and see how it functions in the literary structure and syntax written by Paul.

### **Literary Context**

The phrase "husband of one wife" (or "man of one woman") is the second qualification within in a larger list in verses 2-3: "above reproach, husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money." The qualifications in verses 2-3 are grammatically grouped together because each item is the object of a single Greek verb-set that can be translated "it is necessary for . . . to be." It is noteworthy that all the other qualifications in this grammatical grouping focus on traits of moral character<sup>2</sup> and the ensuing reputation from such moral practices. This suggests that in Paul's mind, the

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<sup>2</sup>The only possible exception is "apt to teach," which seems at surface, to be more a skill than a character trait. However, the regard for teaching in both the Jewish and Hellenistic cultures would mean they would likely see aptness for teaching as a character trait, not just a talent.

central concern of this set of qualifications is that the elder must set an example of moral excellence.

A second characteristic of the items listed with “husband of one wife” is that in good moral fashion, all involve the exercise of choice. The elder is to be one who *chooses* to be hospitable, not violent, gentle, etc. The accompanying items in this grammatical grouping focus on things over which a person has basic volitional control. These two points suggest that Paul intended “husband of one wife” to be addressing an issue of moral character over which the elder can exercise volitional control.

### **A Challenging Problem**

The moral-volitional context in which the qualification of being husband of one wife functions, leads to unique challenges. On the one hand, the GE view claims that men and women are ontologically equal,<sup>3</sup> even after the fall. On the other hand, the GE view also asserts that both before and after the fall, the male gender was given spiritual headship over the female gender in a manner not restricted solely to marriage, but applying more broadly in all gender relations related to matters of “spiritual authority.” This articulation presents us with the first half of our conundrum, which can be illustrated as follows.

#### **Problem 1**

Suppose we can find both a man and a woman in the church whose skills, talents and character are indistinguishable as related to the qualifications in 1 Tim 3. Neither has any discernable moral or spiritual advantage over the other. In other words, the only humanly discernable difference in “qualifications” between these two candidates is his maleness and her femaleness. Since she is otherwise fully qualified in every other aspect of the listed qualifications for eldership found 1 Tim 3, to now exclude her from that office means her proscription is based solely on the issue of gender. Since this woman is rejected solely because she is not a male, the exclusion of this woman is based solely on the ontological quality of femaleness. Therefore, intellectual honesty forces me to admit that in this view, men and women cannot logically be said to be ontologically equal.

What this means is that the slogan “ontologically equal but differing in function,” is self refuting. While it claims women are ontologically equal to men, it relegates them to being under male spiritual authority, solely on the basis of an ontological quality (gender). This view thus makes women patently unequal to men in spiritual things, based solely on an ontological quality, namely gender. Therefore, the claim of ontological equality but with a difference in function is implicitly dishonest in its claims of gender equality, and is thus self-contradictory, meaning it refutes itself.

#### **Problem 2 and the Whole Conundrum**

The second half of the conundrum confronting the GE view is that to avoid the previous problem of self-refutation, one would have to claim that gender is not an ontological quality. While such a step may solve the previous problem, it creates even greater woes. We would now be required to view gender as a matter of personal volition and moral example and not as part of one’s essential nature.

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<sup>3</sup>That is, equal at the level of essential nature.

While such a view would better fit Paul's literary context of qualifications involving personal choice, the cost is catastrophic. The solution that delivers the claims of ontological equality from self-refutation requires adopting the same view of gender as is advocated by those agitating for LGBTQ rights. I am currently researching LGBTQ advocates who reject the position that gender is an ontological quality, arguing instead that gender is either self-chosen, a social construct or some kind of mix of choice and social construct, and is thus malleable and fluid. Furthermore, if maleness must now be a matter of volition and morals to avoid ontological inequality, logic would demand that anyone choosing the male gender has the potential to qualify for the office of elder, regardless of bodily physiology. Thus, to state the full nature of this conundrum element, the GE interpretation of "husband of one wife," combined with the GE slogan of ontological equality while differing in function, either lies to me about an ontological equality that does not really exist, or it demands I believe in a patently unbiblical view of gender. I find neither option biblically palatable.

### **Biblical Theology and 1 Tim 3**

In contrast to the LGBTQ view, the Bible always treats gender as something one cannot choose or control. Genesis depicts God as creating two genders in Eden. Adam and Eve were given no choice over which gender God made them to be. This pattern continues in the natural process of bearing children, as parents cannot control the gender of their children. (I once met a family with 8 girls, the result of continuous efforts to have a boy.) Even if parents have artificial means by which to gender-select, that child still has no influence in choosing their own gender. Thus, gender is biblically viewed as a matter of essential nature, not one of volition and character.

It seems highly odd, therefore, to attempt force an issue beyond personal control into 1 Tim 3 when the context is all about items involving individual volition. To impose gender-based qualification into a literary context of moral and volitional items seems imprudent, for it unwittingly paves the way for an unbiblical redefinition of gender as a matter of personal choice or social construction. We have, however, even more evidence that "husband of one wife" was intended by Paul to be understood primarily as a character-volition issue and not as addressing gender relations.

### **An Analogous Phrase in 1 Tim 5**

In 1 Tim 5:9, Paul begins a list of qualifications for enrolling widows into church support. This list makes use of the identical syntax as "husband of one wife," as found in 1 Tim 3:2. The only difference is the reversal of gender oriented terms, so the widow is to have been the "wife of one husband." What, then, can the parallel phrase in 1 Tim 5 tell us about being the husband of one wife?

After stating a minimum age for a widow's enrollment was 60 years, Paul changes grammatical style in a way distinguishing the other qualifications from the issue of age. Each of these additional qualifications for enrolling the widow are areas of moral character and virtuous behavior all of which involve personal control through choice. In verse 9, one of these qualifications is that she must have been "a wife of one husband" (or "a woman of one man"). What is the point of the widow being known as the wife of one husband (or a woman of one man)?

It seems unlikely that Paul's primary purpose was to say that the widow must be a *woman*. The very term he uses for widow already connotes the person in question is female. If the phrase "wife of one husband" is primarily meant to indicate that a widow must be a woman, then Paul has lapsed into a tautology, "a widow must be a woman." This would be like saying a father must be a male, when by definition we already know a father is a male. Such statements are generally meaningless due to the redundancy of information. In this case, we *already know* that a widow is a woman, so Paul must have more in mind than her gender. In like manner, Paul cannot be demanding that the widow be currently married for that would make her a non-widow.

One more clue to Paul's intent is that he introduces this phrase (wife of one husband) with a perfect participle, "having become" the wife of one husband. The sense of the participle is that in the past, the widow would have become the wife of one husband (or as a women of one man), and continued as the one-man woman in relationship with him. The primary point thus seems to be that this widow must not be a woman known for simultaneous relations with multiple men. Rather, she must have a moral reputation of faithfulness to one man/husband. In short, the point of the phrase "wife of one husband" is not that widow must be a woman, but that she must be sexually pure. Paul does not want to enroll a woman under church support or employ who is not practicing a biblically driven sexual ethics. Plainly, the phrase is highlighting a moral virtue (sexual integrity) and not her gender.

Paul's discussion of the widow suggests, then, that the phrase, "husband of one wife" (or man of one woman) is likewise intended to connote that the elder should be exemplary in sexual integrity. The elder is not to be a multi-woman man. This harmonizes well with my previous advocacy of the broader reading of this phrase. Thus, a single man such as Paul can be an example of sexual purity – a one-woman man – and qualify as an elder even if he has not yet found or married his "one woman." This "plain reading," derived by comparing Scripture with Scripture, fits perfectly into the context of 1 Tim 3:2-5 with its focus on moral virtues developed through personal choice. Sexual purity is thus a better "plain" reading than forcing a gender issue into a context ill suited for it.

### **Gender the Least Important Element**

I would further suggest that the masculine element of "man" in this phrase is of the least concern due the nature of Greek Syntax. Writers of NT Greek put the works they want to emphasize first or early in a phrase or sentence and place the least important items last. A check of Paul's syntax here shows that the phrase literally translates as "of one woman/wife a man." The emphasis is thus on "of one woman," i.e. her sexual integrity. If Paul was mainly concerned with the gender issue, we would expect a syntactical structure placing "man" first and not last in the phrase. We thus have multiple indicators that Paul's main intent was to highlight the sexual virtue of the elder, not the elder's gender.

### **The Deacon as Husband of One Wife**

In similar fashion, Paul gives qualifications for deacons using the same male language, stating the deacon is to be husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:12 - the same exact phrase as used of the elder). This qualification, however, follows verse 11 where there is

controversy as to whether “let the wives/women be sober,” means the deacon’s wife or female deacons. Support for the latter view—that Paul is speaking to female deacons—comes from Paul’s designation of Phoebe as a deacon in the church of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). Certainly Phoebe could not be husband of one wife, yet she is a recognized deacon (a title Paul also applied to himself and Apollos)<sup>4</sup>. Phoebe, however could qualify for being a deacon, in part, because she was sexually pure, which is what we have seen to be Paul’s primary meaning for the phrase, “husband of one wife.” Thus, we have good reasons to believe that the plain, common sense reading of “husband of one wife” points to sexual purity as part of the moral qualifications for being an elder. We also have good reasons to believe that Paul’s intended function for that phrase was not for specifying a gender requirement. So why did Paul use the masculine gender?

### **The Nature of Job Descriptions**

Admittedly, trying to answer why Paul used the masculine gender in “husband of one wife” will be speculative. Common sense suggests that we recognize that like any other list of job qualifications, there are descriptive elements reflecting the dominant conditions at the time the qualifications were posted, especially in reference to gender-specific words and pronouns. For example, one website describing the qualifications of a critical care nurse contains several statements such as, “A registered nurse who wants to pursue certification as a critical care RN must hold an unencumbered RN license from the state where **she** wishes to practice, according to the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses website. The candidate's RN license must not have any conditions or provisions that limit **her** ability to practice nursing in any way. **She** must not be subject to formal discipline by any state Board of Nursing.”<sup>5</sup>

No one is going to say that the author of these statements intends us to understand that only women can be critical care nurses.<sup>6</sup> The feminine pronouns reflect the dominant practice that over 90% of nurses are women. These pronouns thus describe the actual, dominant situation and are not prescribing that only women can be critical care nurses. Common sense catches this point easily, for there is no theological controversy over whether men can be nurses. In like manner, if we lay aside theological agendas, common sense suggests that Paul’s use of a Greek syntax which places the gender-specific term “man/husband” in the lowest priority of emphasis indicates this aspect is not prescriptive but reflective of the usual practice of male elders in the early church. His gendered language functions descriptively similar to the function of the pronouns in the nursing qualifications just cited.

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<sup>4</sup>1 Cor 3:5; See also where he applies the term to Timothy and himself, 2 Cor 3:6).

<sup>5</sup>Mike Parker (Demand Media), “Critical Care RN Qualifications” <http://work.chron.com/critical-care-rn-qualifications-1617.html>. Undated. Accessed August, 2014. Emphasis Supplied.

<sup>6</sup>One can only come to this conclusion by breaking up the phrase to effectively read, “the critical care nurse must be a woman,” and thus utterly ignoring what are the emphasized qualifications.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe the “plain reading” does not exclude women from being elders, but neither does it make an explicit call for women as elders. The evidence indicates that Paul was giving a list of character-based moral qualifications that both male and female can exemplify, couched in terms of prevailing contemporary practice. I believe the “plain reading” should honor the literary context and grammatical forms showing this passage is focused on the moral character of the elder or deacon, in this case sexual purity and integrity, and not their gender.