Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the three-word Greek phrase miás gynaikos andres (“husband of one wife” 1 Tim. 3:12), or its parallel form for widows, “wife of one husband.” Four times he states the phrase as a requirement for elders and deacons who are or have been married and for dependent widows.

An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach. (1 Tim. 3:2)

Appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. (Titus 1:5–6)

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. (1 Tim. 3:12)

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband. (1 Tim. 5:9)

Note that in order to qualify for either a church office or financial aid from the church, individuals in all three of these groups must be examined by the church and its leaders for marital fitness.

This qualification appears only in the two Pauline letters of 1 Timothy and Titus. So it is possible that Paul, who developed the qualification lists for elders, deacons, and dependent widows, coined this rare phrase. Because the meaning of this phrase is not entirely clear, it has been accorded various interpretations, which we will assess in order to eliminate those that are not consistent with Paul’s overall teaching on marriage and singleness. Whatever this ambiguous, three-word phrase actually means, it cannot contradict the clear biblical teaching on marriage.

1—A Polygynist Disqualified?

This view holds that the phrase “husband of one wife” specifically prohibits a polygynist from church office. A polygynist is a man who has two or more wives at the same time. (People commonly use the terms “polygamist” and “polygamy,” but, in this case, “polygynist” and “polygyny” are technically correct terms because only men are referred to.)

This may appear to be a good interpretation, but it is made unlikely to be Paul’s main thrust by the parallel phrase “wife of one husband” (1 Tim. 5:9) in the qualifications for widows who receive financial assistance from the church. We can be certain that Paul is not addressing polyandry, that is, a woman who is married to two or more men at one time. Polyandry was abhorrent to both Jews and Romans, and was definitely not a problem in the early church.

Some suggest that by this requirement Paul was barring from office a married man who has a concubine (or concubines), that is, a woman with whom he cohabits but who is not technically his wife. Although this is possible, Paul no doubt would have considered concubinage to be another form of polygyny. The question is, was polygyny such a problem in the church that Paul had to address this issue in his list of qualifications for elders and deacons? While polygyny would indeed disqualify a man from serving as an elder or deacon, it is doubtful that this was a looming problem Paul felt he needed to address.

2—A Remarried Widower Disqualified?

An ancient interpretation of the phrase “husband of one wife” disqualified from the office of elder or deacon any man who remarried after the death of his first spouse. The early biblical commentator Ambrosiaster wrote, “God
decreed that a man should have only one wife with whom he would be blessed. No one who has a second wife is blessed.” Although this thinking seems to have the literality of the phrase in its favor, it is at odds with the overall biblical teaching on marriage.

First, the Bible unequivocally teaches that death dissolves the marriage bond and frees the living spouse to remarry without sinning (1 Cor. 7:9, 39; Rom. 7:2–3). When one’s spouse dies, the surviving partner is no longer a married person. Therefore, he or she is no longer bound to the deceased and becomes single and free to remarry. So Paul’s rare phrase should not be understood to be a prohibition that takes precedence over Scripture’s sanction of a second marriage following the death of one’s spouse. As one biblical commentator, J. E. Huther, warns, “Nowhere else in the New Testament is there the slightest trace of any ordinance against second marriages.”

Furthermore, the phrase itself does not plainly indicate whether it refers to one wife in a lifetime or one wife at the time of a man’s consideration for office. For these reasons a widower who remarries can still be considered to be the “husband of one wife.”

Second, from a biblical perspective, remarriage after the death of a spouse does not demonstrate weakness of character. Those who hold to the “marriage only once in a lifetime” view cannot identify what is shameful or disgraceful about the remarriage of a widower or why a second marriage makes someone unfit for the office of elder or deacon. In fact, this interpretation smacks of false asceticism, the very censure Paul condemns in 1 Timothy 4:3. He rebuked the false teachers at Ephesus because they were “men who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods.”

Third, this interpretation invents different standards for different categories of believers: elders, deacons, and dependent widows would not be able to remarry following the deaths of previous spouses while other believers are permitted to do so (1 Cor. 7:39). Such division in the family of God is incongruous with the rest of the New Testament teaching on every-member ministry, every member a “saint,” and the priesthood of every believer. In addition, the qualifications for elders and deacons are not intended to be “super” requirements. Rather, they are the fundamental qualities that should characterize every mature believer. E. K. Simpson concludes:

To postulate grades of official sanctity, among members of the same spiritual body, may be orthodox clericalism, but it is heterodox Christianity.

Fourth, in giving apostolic instructions on marriage, singleness, and remarriage, Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you” (1 Cor. 7:35). The “married only once” interpretation, in contrast, puts an unbearable restraint on elders, deacons, and young widows who would be penalized for not having the gift of singleness.

Fifth, 1 Timothy 5:9 lists the qualifications of the childless widows whom the local congregation was obligated to enroll for regular financial aid:

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband. (1 Tim. 5:9)

If the phrase “wife of one husband” means marriage to only one man ever, then Paul’s counsel in verse 14 encouraging younger widows to remarry is quite confusing and potentially hurtful to them later in life. Paul specifically urges younger widows to marry:

So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their household, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. (1 Tim. 5:14)

What if the widow’s second husband dies before she does? Is she then no longer eligible for the widows’ roll because she followed the apostle’s advice to remarry when she was young? If the phrase “wife of one husband” does not limit a woman to having only one husband in her lifetime, then there is no conflict in Paul’s counsel.

Sixth, it is almost unthinkable that Paul, who is so sensitive to marital issues, would bar church leaders from remarriage and offer no further explanation for a teaching in apparent disharmony with the rest of Scripture. Consider, for example, 1 Corinthians 7:7–9 where Paul counsels unmarried Christians to consider singleness:
I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Following his instruction, he is quick to qualify his words because he knew people could assume he was speaking disparagingly of marriage. But Paul is not making a negative statement about marriage. Rather, he wants his readers to consider singleness, which can be used effectively to further the work of God.

Paul’s counsel, then, is for elders and deacons as well as for every other member of the congregation. If an elder or deacon is a widower and decides to remain single for greater, undivided service to God, that is good. But if he remarries, that also is good. If Paul believed that remarriage after the death of a spouse deserved censure, even prohibition, he would have included that to bolster his counsel in 1 Corinthians 7 for widows and widowers to remain single.

Seventh, if this phrase means married to only one woman ever, consider how frightening, unrealistic, and potentially harmful that restriction would have been on the early church. When Paul wrote, and until recent years, it was not uncommon for a person to lose one’s spouse through death at a relatively young age. In many cases, the death of a young wife left a husband with the burden of raising children without a wife and left the children to do without a mother.

Why, if a godly elder or deacon lost his spouse through death and remarried, would he then lose his place of leadership in the church? Such a restriction would hurt both the family and the church. From a New Testament perspective, it is inconceivable that this rare, three-word Greek phrase was meant to disqualify remarried widowers, or that such a remarriage entailed any kind of offense.

3—A Remarried Divorcé Disqualified?

Another interpretation of the phrase “husband of one wife” excludes a once-divorced and remarried man from being an elder or deacon. Among Jews, Romans, and Greeks, it was easy to divorce and remarry. It would not be impossible for two or three women who had been married to the same man to be alive. Some have termed this circumstance “successive polygamy” and contend that Paul prohibited a previously divorced and remarried man from church office. They claim this prohibition is due to the potentially embarrassing situations an ex-wife (or ex-wives) could create for a man in the position of elder or deacon as well as for the whole congregation.

Some who assert this position do not believe that divorce and remarriage are ever allowed in Scripture. According to this view, a remarried divorcé is technically an adulterer, certainly not the “husband of one wife,” and is not qualified for church office. Advocates of this view emphasize the Mark 10:10–12 and Luke 16:18 passages that omit the exception clause found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. They do not seem to make an exception even if the divorce and remarriage occurred before one’s conversion to Christ.

Most students of Scripture, however, find that there are biblical grounds for the dissolution of a marriage and for divorce in the cases of marital infidelity and desertion by the unbelieving marriage partner (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15). In such cases, remarriage is permissible and lawful. To remarry after a lawful divorce does not mean that one has two spouses, or that the new marriage itself is in any way inferior or not permitted.

If the elders of the church are of the opinion that the Bible forbids all divorce and remarriage, they may prohibit men who have been divorced from standing as candidates for church office. But, if the elders think that divorce and remarriage are biblically permissible in certain cases, then a previously divorced candidate may be considered, with special care being taken in his examination (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:22–25).

The phrase “husband of one wife” is a positive judgement of the candidate’s character and public reputation. So, when a man is considered for church office, questions about his previous divorce and remarriage should be delicately addressed in light of Scripture. For instance, has he been remarried long enough that it is clear he is in a settled marriage and demonstrates the traits of a “one-woman man”? If such sensitive marital issues like divorce and remarriage are not honestly investigated by the church leadership, then a potential risk exists of loss of credibility, misinformed gossip, and conflict.
4—A Bachelor Disqualified?

Many times people claim that elders and deacons must be married with children because the Bible says they must be husbands and fathers. Although almost all scholars and commentators reject this view, many people are still of this opinion. If Paul required marriage of elders and deacons, he contradicted himself by his instructions in 1 Corinthians 7, where he encouraged singleness for its advantages of more effective, undivided service to Christ and his people (vv. 32–35; compare Matt. 19:12). If marriage is required of the elder or deacon, Paul would have hedged his affirmation of singleness because it would be a disadvantage for the unmarried, aspiring church officer.

Similarly, some argue that elders and deacons must have children (plural) because the requirement is that they manage their “children” well (1 Tim. 3:4–5, 12). But Paul did not require an elder or deacon to father two or more children. Nor did he disqualify childless men from church office. He simply avoided writing the awkward expression “managing their child or children well.” His stipulation is that church officers with a child or children must manage them well.

Before setting down the “husband of one wife” requirement for the elder and deacon, Paul stated that he “must be above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). Being “above reproach” is the overarching principle summarizing the full catalog of elder and deacon qualifications. Not being married or not having children were not and are not matters of reproach, especially with respect to God’s will for a man’s life (1 Cor. 7:8, 17; Matt. 19:12).

Other commentators reason that an unmarried elder or deacon cannot understand or counsel married people with children, yet another elder or deacon can fill that need. The single elder or deacon has other assets. He can empathize with and counsel other singles better than a married elder or deacon. He has fewer demanding family obligations, greater flexibility in his schedule, and more availability to people. Such can also be said of an elder or deacon who is married but has no children.

Besides, the parallel phrase in 1 Timothy 5:9, “wife of one husband,” certainly cannot be a statement requiring marriage. The widow obviously has already been married.

The fact is, the majority of men in the church are married and have children. Scripture requires that prospective elders and deacons keep their homes in order, be responsible fathers, and be above reproach in their marital relationships, both in the eyes of the church and of society. Obviously such qualifications do not apply to elders and deacons who are single or childless.

5—Marital Fidelity

Since these four views discussed do not stand up to biblical scrutiny, it is best to understand the phrase “husband of one wife” to mean marital faithfulness as described by the whole of Scripture. It is a positive quality, the first of six positive qualities stated after the overarching requirement, “above reproach” of 1 Timothy 3:2:

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (italics added).

This is true of both instances when Paul required marital fidelity, following immediately after the overarching qualification, “above reproach,” in 1 Timothy 3:2 and again in Titus 1:5–6:

Appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife.

First and foremost, then, the elder must be a man who is above reproach in his marital relationship. In this context the “husband of one wife” qualification is most likely a Pauline idiom emphasizing the positive virtue of fidelity in marriage, with marriage defined by Paul and Jesus as the “one flesh” union of one man and one woman (Eph. 5:31–32; Matt. 19:4–6).
These words stipulate the candidate’s character and reputation as applied to his wife, or even to other women. As Sidney Page explains, the phrase encapsulates “the characteristic of being devoted exclusively to one’s spouse.” It is “a moral quality which is currently being demonstrated.” A few scholars answer the question, “What kind of man is he?” with the paraphrase, he is “a one-woman type of man.” Clearly, the emphasis is on the man’s character as demonstrated in his faithful, monogamous marriage.

Paul was acutely aware of how fundamentally important it was to the local church and its witness that its leaders be known for marriages that were “above reproach,” neither dubious or scandalous. An elder or deacon candidate might be technically married to only one woman, but also have the reputation of being a womanizer, and, therefore, not be qualified as “the husband of one wife.” Any man involved in an unscriptural divorce and remarriage, cohabitation, marital infidelity, womanizing, polygyny, or same-sex marriage is automatically disqualified from church office.

Limitations

This three-word Greek phrase by itself cannot answer the many marital and moral issues posed by Paul’s marital qualification. What about sexual and marital sins committed before a person’s conversion to Christ? Or, sexual sins committed by a believer in the past? What about people who have legally divorced and remarried (assuming the local church allows for such)? Can these be elders or deacons? What about the man who marries a woman who had been previously divorced? Or, the deacon or elder whose wife unjustly divorces him? What about a Christian widow, married twice before her conversion, or one of several wives of an unbelieving man now divorced by him because of her faith? What if a deacon candidate’s wife leaves her husband or she is not a Christian? What about the process of forgiveness and restoration of a fallen spiritual leader?

These and many other painful and controversial questions are not answered by this qualification, “husband of one wife.” Such issues must be handled from the perspective of the whole of Scripture’s teaching on forgiveness, divorce and remarriage, grace, and restoration, as well as its instructions on leadership example, the full spectrum of qualifications for elders and deacons, and their moral fitness for office.

All deviations from God’s standards for marital status and behavior are bound to confuse and perplex us. Sin always confuses, distorts, and divides, so there will always be diverse opinions on such questions. But this in no way diminishes the obligation of the local church and its leaders to face these issues and make wise, scripturally sound decisions. In all these heartbreaking situations, prayer, faithfulness to God’s Word, protection of the church’s public reputation, and the honor of Jesus’ name are the supreme guides.

Marriage: A Unique One-Flesh Relationship

On this point we should all agree: For Bible-believing Christians, it is God—not secular society—who defines marriage. From the forthright and direct Old Testament Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus and Paul, marriage was presented as, and assumed to be, a heterosexual, monogamous, “one-flesh” relationship. Our Lord was unambiguously explicit on this most excellent, foundational institution for all men and women.

Jesus taught that, at the creation of the world, marriage was divinely instituted by the Creator. The record of this first marriage established by God is in Genesis 2:18–25, the passage Jesus quoted as authoritative:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matt. 19:3–6; also Mark 10:2–9)

In his book God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation, Andreas J. Köstenberger demonstrates that there is a distinctly Christian theology of marriage, child rearing, and family order:

The biblical concept of marriage is best described as a covenant, a sacred bond between a man and a woman, instituted by and publicly entered into, before God (whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple), normally consummated by sexual intercourse.
In light of this biblical definition of marriage, Köstenberger goes on to speak of “the permanence of marriage,” “the sacredness of marriage,” “the intimacy of marriage,” “the mutuality of marriage,” and “the exclusiveness of marriage.”

When Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he had already sent his definitive masterwork of marital instruction to the church in Ephesus (Eph. 5:21–33). There he stated that marriage is a unique, one-flesh relationship. No other relationship on earth is like it:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph. 5:31–33)

A man and a woman, although two separate persons, are joined to each other as one in marriage. Because they are now one, the husband may not use and abuse his wife, but is to give her every consideration he would wish for himself: “Husbands [like Christ] should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Eph. 5:28).

The apostle supported his charge to husbands from Genesis 2:24: “The two shall become one flesh” (v. 31). Significantly, he proclaimed that this physical, one-flesh relationship of marriage is a model, a picture of the spiritual unity of Christ and his Church as one body (vv. 31–32): “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (v. 32). The mystery that is great is the spiritual union of Christ and his Church (see also 1 Cor. 6:15–17).

Those in the church at Ephesus who had to judge if a candidate for office was above reproach in his marital life would have known from Paul that marriage is a unique, one-flesh relationship, both heterosexual and monogamous in its nature. They were also aware of the Pauline challenge that Christian husbands are to love their wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25, also vv. 28, 33). Furthermore, they would have been acutely mindful that God repeatedly and sternly warned his people against the sinful sexual practices of the unbelieving world, and that they were to exhibit sexual purity both within and without their marriage relationships. For these reasons, they would have understood the necessity for elders and deacons to be examined and found to be above reproach in their marital relationships and faithful to their marital vows and covenant promises.

In God’s household, God’s good and gracious design for marriage is to be practiced, protected, and taught. And, above all, marital faithfulness is to be modeled by the church’s leaders.

---

1 Commentaries on Galatians–Philemon, ACT, trans. and ed., Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 129.
3 The Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 50.
4 For a defense of this view, see William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1984).
7 Ibid.
9 Andreas J. Köstenberger, God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 78.
10 Ibid., 77–78.
11 1 Timothy 3:10; 5:24–25.