

Elder Position Paper
Interpretation and Application of the Phrase ‘One Woman Man’

In first-century society, sexual license was rampant. The restriction of sexual expression to holy matrimony was an ethical innovation of early Christianity (cf. Acts 15:29) and fundamental to the Christian ethic (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:18 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). On the matter of sexual purity, an elder of the church was to be above reproach. He was to be exemplary in the discipline of his sexual impulses. He was to confine his eyes, heart and actions to the woman God had given to him, the woman to whom he was married.

It is precisely this undefiled commitment to the wife that Paul requires as a condition for eldership when he uses the term ‘one woman man’ in 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6. The phrase thus enjoins a ***higher*** standard than that which would simply prohibit the office of eldership to one who had been divorced and remarried. It is a call to moral rectitude ***within*** marriage, and a warning that sexual compromise will disqualify a man from leadership in the greatest work of all, the work of the church of Jesus Christ.

It thus does not seem Paul is using the term ‘one-woman-man’ as a technical term for a man who has never been divorced (and remarried). It is more natural to take the phrase at face value, as issuing a strong caution against any form of sexual immorality.

A very important application of the phrase, though, would be to prohibit a man who is divorced from occupying a seat among the elders, when his divorce represents a failure to uphold the principle of absolute fidelity to one’s wife.

But it would seem the phrase ‘one woman man’ is not intended by Paul to prohibit the following from becoming elders:

1) A person who was married and divorced in his pre-Christian life – in the same way in which 1 Timothy 3:3 is not intended to prohibit eldership to one who was ‘drunkard’ or ‘a lover of money’ in his pre-Christian life;

2) A person who was a fornicator in his pre-Christian life (which would have excluded some of the greatest Christian leaders of church history; e.g., Augustine and perhaps most everyone in the earliest church);

3) A person who is married to a woman who has been divorced in the past, from a husband who was not a Christian and/or guilty of sexual infidelities and who initiated a divorce against her.