

### **An Elder: “The husband of one wife, vigilant”**

1 Timothy 3:2, “*A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;*”

**The Husband of one wife** -- The practice of polygamy was common in the days of the apostles. Hence the prohibition of polygamy is definitely alluded to in the above verse. But does the phrase point to the marital status of the man? If it does, does it mean that a man is allowed to be married only once in his entire life? If he is found to have been married more than once, then is he disqualified from eldership? The answer is that the Bible does allow for remarriage after the death of the first spouse (cf. 1 Cor 7:39). Therefore if it is lawful in Holy Scriptures for a man to remarry after the death of one's wife, then he should not be disqualified from serving as an elder simply because he is remarried. The phrase, "the husband of one wife" cannot refer to a person's marital status.

But some have argued that it could mean that a person has to be married, otherwise he cannot qualify as an elder. If this interpretation is true then it begs the question, “What kind of qualification is found in being married?” The fact that he is married has no noble qualification at all. What spiritual qualification is required in finding a wife? We live in a world where marriage is done out of convenience and for some ulterior motives. Unbelievers marry all the time. Marriage in itself has absolutely no spiritual quality! If there is none, then what Paul is teaching here is not a reference to the person's marital status where an elder must be married or else he cannot be an elder. Paul himself was not married. If it is a reference to a compulsory marital status, and if a person is a married elder and his wife dies, is he to resign his eldership or find a new wife as soon as possible in order to retain his eldership? This cannot be. Thus, the interpretation of a “compulsory marriage” cannot be accepted.

Burkitt explains, “The husband of one wife; that is, one at a time; not guilty of the sin of having many wives, or of putting away the wife by divorce, as the Jews frequently did for frivolous causes. Here note, 1. The apostle's command (that the bishop be the husband of one wife) doth not oblige him to marry, but it establishes the lawfulness of his marriage, if he sees sufficient reason for it. Nor, 2. Does the apostle here forbid successive marriages, as if when a bishop has married one wife, or more, he might not lawfully marry again; for this he elsewhere allows, 1Co 7:8. From this it may not be in a man's power to abstain: many lose their first, and sometimes their second wives, so soon, that were not after-marriages lawful, all the ends of marriage must be frustrate to them; yet may we suppose by these words, and many others, that St. Paul proposes a greater degree of chastity to church governors than to other persons.”

Burkitt is right to point out that the emphasis here is one of “chastity.” The literal translation of the phrase “the husband of one wife” is “a one woman man.” In other words the man

chosen as an elder must not have problems with “women”. If he is single and is known to be “a playboy” or “a Casanova” in the church, then he is disqualified. For example, if he is found to have pornographic material of any kind then he would be disqualified. Sexual sin of any nature is one of the most common ways to destroy a man. The sins of fornication and adultery are definitely included here. This phrase also teaches against the sins of homosexuality and bisexuality. The elder is a man who does not have a sexual problem. He is extremely careful in his relationships with all women that he meets. He is a perfect gentleman among them. He treats all women with respect and with honour. He does not despise them and is not frivolous with them. He treats all women with Christian love and the highest integrity.

Many verses in the Bible have been written warning men of the dangers of committing sexual sins. A case in point is found in Proverbs 7:21-27, *“With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him. He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; Till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life. Hearken unto me now therefore, O ye children, and attend to the words of my mouth. Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths. For she hath cast down many wounded: yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death.”* All pastors and elders must take heed to this stern warning from God. If they do not do so they will surely fall into this sin.

The society that we are living in today is like Sodom and Gomorrah. It is very common now for couples to live together without being married. Movie stars and sports stars that are the idols of the world are committing the sins of fornication and adultery publicly and feel no shame. The sins of fornication and adultery are flaunted by the people of the world as if this is the new acceptable way of life. The stigma of committing the sin of fornication and adultery is totally lost today. It has been replaced by promiscuity and wanton acceptance. The conscience has been “seared” like a hot knife cutting through soft butter. There is no more shame in being divorced or living in fornication and adultery. Are we surprised? Not in the least, for these have been prophesied by God as one of the signs that will be common worldwide in the last days. Revelation 18:3, *“For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.”*

What is most surprising and shocking is that the church has lowered her standard of sexual morality. In some cases pastors and elders who commit such sexual sins are not even disciplined. Their sins are covered up by their fellow elders. Sadly, even when there is discipline imposed, the pastors and elders who committed adultery are allowed back into office after they have “repented” of their sexual sin. To not let them go back into the ministry has been said by some to be unforgiving! This is a fallacious argument. Forgiving the pastor or elder who has committed adultery does not mean ignoring the consequence of the sin

committed. Those who think and reason this way have lowered the standard of holiness required by God for the highest office in Christ's church. The pastor brings shame to the office of a bishop and the name of Christ when he commits the sin of adultery while in office. To forgive him after repentance is biblical. However, there are earthly consequences that he must bear for committing the sin of adultery. The consequences would include stepping down from office, suspension from all preaching appointments inside and outside of his home church with immediate effect, counselling sessions with him and his wife and family, suspension from taking the Lord's Supper until such time when fruits of repentance are seen, compulsory attendance at Prayer meetings and worship services that will be strictly enforced, his life will be carefully monitored in order to ensure that no contact is made with the other adulterous party. The overall period of suspension is a minimum of one year to see genuine fruits of repentance and restoration of relationship with his wife and family. Even after all have been done with genuine fruits of repentance, he will NOT be allowed back into the office of pastor or elder. He will be allowed to serve in a diminished capacity. Anything less than this spiritual treatment would result in lowering the highest standard of the office of the bishop that God has set for His church. All pastors and elders must take serious note of this! They carry the image of Christ on their body as His witnesses. To commit adultery while in office is to bring great shame to the Name and image of Christ to all and especially to God's people.

Remember and be warned that if he does not want to repent of his sin of adultery, God says that fornicators and adulterers have no part in the kingdom of heaven. Revelation 21:8, "*But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers [fornicators and adulterers], and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.*" Also in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "*Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.*"

This is one of the most important requirements of an elder. He must not have any sexual problem. If he is married, he must have eyes only for his wife and no one else. He is to be happily married and totally devoted to his wife and must love her as Christ loved His church and gave His life for the church.

**Vigilant**--It comes from the Greek word "*nephaleos*" which means "to be circumspect." The root word in Greek is "*nepho*" which means "to abstain from wine." Total abstinence from wine is the emphasis. Wine incites the passions of man. When a man drinks, his mind is dulled to a certain degree and his eyes can easily turn bloodshot. He tends to act foolishly and will sin in the process. He will utter secrets and speak "like a leaking tap" non-stop. **Proverbs 23:29-35**, "*Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that*

*go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.”*

The person who lacks this quality is one with a passion out of control. He will love the wrong things. His priorities will be worldly and carnal as opposed to heavenly and spiritual. He will be so caught up with worldly pursuits that he will have no time for the things of God. His list of priorities would be upside down. To make such a person an elder would render the spiritual work ineffective at best and, at worst, disastrous. Whenever there is an important event or meeting in the church, he would either be absent or reluctantly attend with a wrong spirit. His body might be present but his heart would be somewhere else. He would make wrong decisions and half-heartedly serve the LORD caring more for the position than the responsibilities of an elder. A Christian who is not vigilant or circumspect cannot be an elder.

**All priests** in OT times who were on duty, including the high priest, were not allowed to drink or even touch the fruit of the vine. Aaron’s two sons, Nadab and Abihu, were burned to death by the LORD because they offered strange fire. They died while they were on duty at the inaugural service of the priestly ministry. Immediately after their deaths the following command in **Leviticus 10:8-11** was given, “*And the LORD spake unto Aaron, saying, Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations: And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean; And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses.*” The priests were given the highest honour by God. They were not merely doing a religious work but they were the God appointed mediators between God and man and man and God. No one else on earth other than the Aaronic descendants were appointed for such a great and divine mediatorial role. They had to possess a very clear mind and heart to serve God. When the people of God brought their offerings, the priests were the only ones who could take the offerings and offer them on behalf of the worshippers. If they failed, the sins of the worshippers would remain. Their role as mediators was indispensable to the spiritual well being of the whole nation of Israel.

All Christians are priests today. They are the only mediators before God and man on the earth. No one else can intercede on behalf of loved ones and friends (including the unbelievers) except the Christian in the family. **1 Peter 2:5**, “*Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, **an holy priesthood**, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*” [Emphasis added] How much more should a bishop remain sober at all times! He

must abstain from wine totally. There is no other option if he is to be God's appointed elder! He has to intercede and make important spiritual decisions on behalf of God's people under his care. He must protect, nurture and teach them the Word of God which is his spiritual responsibility. The spiritual welfare of all the men, women and children in the church are in his care. He must have a lucid and very clear mind and not one that is clouded by wine even in the slightest!

**All kings** in OT times also had to practise total abstinence. Their duties were just as important because of their position as king. They had to make decisions that affected the entire nation of God's people. **Proverbs 31:4-5**, "*It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted.*" Are not Christians also kings? **1Peter 2:9**, "*But ye are a chosen generation, a **royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*" All Christians are royalty and one day will rule with Christ. The time to begin our kingly conduct is from the moment we become Christians. The bishop makes decisions that affect the entire church, which will have eternal consequences. In this regard, his duties are just as important as that of the kings of Israel!

If this requirement is demanded of all believers of Christ, how much more when it comes to the qualification of the bishop as priest and prince to practise total abstinence! This is required of him from Scriptures. His mind and passions must be under control at all times. He must be circumspect in his behaviour whereby there must not be worldly and carnal passions. When he is "under the influence" he will lose control. The word "vigilant" in short points to having a heart or passion under control at all times. Priorities are always focused heavenward and with eternal perspectives in view. A bishop with such priorities will be a blessing to the church and lead the church heavenward. With a clear and biblical mind God's children will be richly blessed and nurtured to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.