

THE PHRASE “HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE” IN 1 TIMOTHY 3:2

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1. Introduction

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 Paul mentions several criteria for persons to be elected as bishops. One of them is that a bishop should be the husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:2). Titus, who was summoned by Paul to appoint elders in different cities, was also given a list enumerating virtues to be found in future elders (Tit 1:5-9). Among these criteria is again the qualification to be “the husband of one wife” (Tit 1:6). Obviously, at that time the terms “bishop/overseer” and “elder” were still being used interchangeably, a fact which is also seen in Acts 20:17 and 28. A bishop or elder was to be the “husband of one wife.” How should this phrase be understood?

2. Suggested Interpretations

Because the phrase “husband of one wife” can at first glance have a number of different meanings, expositors came up with various interpretations such as the following:

- (1) The term “wife” in this phrase has to be understood spiritually. It is the church “to which the bishop must consider himself married.”¹
- (2) The phrase stresses monogamy and is directed against polygamy. The emphasis is on “one”: Only one wife at one time and being completely faithful to one’s wife. The person to be elected as an elder/bishop must have refrained from practicing polygamy in the past and should not practice polygamy at the present time.²

¹ Homer A. Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 122.

² Ralph Earle, “1, 2 Timothy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (EBC) 11* (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 364.

- (3) The elder "must not be one who has divorced a previous wife and remarried."³
- (4) The elder must be a married man.⁴ Furthermore, he should have at least two children, because in 1 Timothy 3:4 children are mentioned in the plural.⁵
- (5) The phrase stresses that an elder/bishop is allowed to marry only once. If his wife passes away he is not entitled to marry again.⁶ In such a case, he could serve as a widower which, however, would be excluded with option (4).
- (6) Paul "requires fidelity within marriage from the bishop."⁷ A mistress is not allowed.⁸
- (7) The elder/bishop must be a man. Women are excluded from that office, because the Greek term for husband found in the phrase "husband of one wife" (literally: "a man of one woman") clearly refers to a male (*anēr*) only and is not as broad as the term *anthropos* which denotes a human being whether male or female.⁹

³ A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 78. Hanson lists four different possibilities (77-78), but chooses the interpretation dealing with divorce (75). Cf. Gottfried Holtz, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 13; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1980), 76. Lists of various interpretations are also found in Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 92. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (The Anchor Bible 35A; NY: Doubleday, 2001), 213-214; Robert M. Johnston, "Shapes of Ministry in the New Testament and Early Church," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (ed. Nancy Vyhmeister; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 50; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 75; Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 122-126; George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 157-159; Thomas D. Lea, & Hayne P. Griffin, Jr. *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (The New American Commentary; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 109-110; and William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary [WBC] 46; Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2000), 170-173.

⁴ Mentioned by Lea, & Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 109.

⁵ Cf., Knight, *1 Pastoral Epistles*, 57.

⁶ Raymond F. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus* (The New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 82; Martin Dibelius & Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 52.

⁷ Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 77.

⁸ Cf. Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 213.

⁹ Cf. P. Gerard Damsteegt, "Shapes of Ministry in the New Testament," in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (ed. M. H. Dyer; Berrien Springs:

- (8) Several of the above suggestions apply simultaneously. W. Lock seems to combine possibilities (2), (3), and (6).¹⁰ Number (5) "is possible, but scarcely likely."¹¹ Knight seems to combine polygamy, concubinage, and promiscuous indulgence, which includes "wrongful divorce and remarriage."¹²

3. Principles for Interpreting Biblical Texts

Obviously not all of these interpretations can be correct at the same time. Some clearly contradict and therefore exclude others. Before moving to a brief evaluation of these suggestions, a few thoughts on principles for interpreting biblical texts are in order. This section is neither dealing with all exegetical steps employed to interpret biblical passages, nor are those that are mentioned explained in detail. However, a reminder of these principles may prepare the way for an evaluation of the eight suggestions mentioned above.

The exegetical task includes among others the study of the historical context of a passage, its literary context, the sentences and phrases of the passage under investigation, and its individual words.

The historical-cultural context consists of the historical-cultural situation when a biblical book was written, or the historical backdrop to which a document was addressed. The historical context is at least partially provided by Scripture. Other material can be helpful to shed light on the historical-cultural situation. In this case it is information about the Greco-Roman world.

The literary context consists of the verses, paragraphs, chapters, and even books that precede and follow the text that is to be studied. Normally, the literary context is more readily available than the historical context. One can distinguish between the larger and the more immediate

Adventists Affirm, 2000), 146; and S. Lawrence Maxwell, "One Chilling Word: A Response to Popular Arguments for Women's Ordination", in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, 179. Whereas the two articles by G. Damsteegt and L. Maxwell attempt to provide exegetical reasons for their conclusions, others published in *Prove all Things* just assume that 1Tim 3:2 has to be understood as excluding women from functioning as elders or prohibiting the ordination of women as elders and pastors. See, for instance, pages 9, 118, 165, 186, 191, 198, 201, 235, 358, 373, 384-386, 389.

¹⁰ Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 36-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37

¹² Cf. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 159.

literary context. When dealing with 1Timothy 3:2 the entire chapter as well as the entire letter have to be taken in consideration. The larger context is provided by the Pauline epistles and the New Testament as a whole.

Larger units within the biblical passage under investigation are verses and short paragraphs. A number of issues have to be considered when studying these units: such as the author's main thought, the structure of the passage, time and geographical location, acting persons, and connections to other parts of the document and to other literature. When studying sentences and phrases the exegete has to focus on syntax, grammatical features, and literary and rhetorical patterns.

When it comes to investigating words, the most important principle is to allow the context of a given sentence to define the meaning of the respective term. In order to further clarify its meaning and see how the author has used it in different places, it is traced at least through the entire biblical book in which it is found. It is important to recognize how the author has used a term and what it meant to him without reading back into the text the current understanding of the word. Furthermore, phrases are more than the sum of words. One must allow the authors to speak for himself within the framework of his original language.

There are certain exegetical fallacies that should be avoided.¹³ One fallacy is to ask questions that the author did not have in mind and draw conclusions based on these questions.¹⁴ Another and yet related problem is the so-called argument from silence. Conclusions have to be based on what a biblical book teaches, not on what it omits. The author's intention is more important than the reader's agenda. Another fallacy is to allow the interpretation of a text to be shaped by preconceived ideas and dogmatic interests. Instead the biblical text should be heard on its own and should receive an unbiased investigation.

Due to its limitation, in this paper not all of these steps will be mentioned. Yet they are the backdrop on which the arguments will be developed. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to provide a brief overview.

¹³ Cf. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

4. Summary of the Historical Situation and Literary Context

In all three Pastoral Letters Paul mentions false teachers and dangerous influences. Jewish-protognostic teachings seem to have endangered various churches. Some house churches may already have been lost (Tit 1:5,10-11). Paul decided to send Timothy and Titus and gave them instruction as to how to deal with the problem. The main purpose for writing these letters may have been the attempt to counter false doctrines by encouraging the preaching of sound doctrine, by establishing a sound church order that would help to maintain the unity of the church even during times of attack against its beliefs, and by promoting a pious life style. The letters contain instructions, encouragement, and a moral challenge the apostle's coworkers.

Since we will focus on 1Tim 3:2, a short summary of the content of this letter is in order. The apostle begins his letter with a common introduction (1:1-3). However, thanksgiving is missing. Immediately after the introduction Paul moves to the problem area, namely false teachers (1:3-11). This passage mentions the law in a negative way in 1:7 and in a favorable way in 1:8-9. The law is not for the righteous but for the sinners. A catalogue of vices follows.

From there Paul proceeds to praise God's mercy and thanks Jesus for bringing salvation not just to him but to all humankind. This message is now entrusted to Timothy, who is challenged to fight a good fight (1:12-20). In chapter 2, Paul stresses the importance of prayer and includes a passage on God as our Savior and Jesus as our only Mediator (2:1-7).

Following this section, the author addresses men and women (2:8-15), bishops, deacons, and deaconesses (3:1-13) and summarizes this section with 3:14-16, where he points to church order—the church as the pillar of truth—and adds a Christological hymn. When he talks about church offices, he puts down the qualifications for those that are to be appointed, bishops and deacons. 2Tim 3:16 may be the center of 1Timothy.

In 1Tim 4:1-5 Paul comes back to the false teachers and their ascetic tendencies. Then, he addresses Timothy directly and challenges him to perform the ministry entrusted to him. This includes being an example and paying attention to himself and the doctrine (4:6-16).

In chapter 5 and 6 older men and women, widows and elders, slaves, false teachers, Timothy himself and through him all Christians as well as the rich are addressed (5:1-6:21). When Paul mentions the elders, he seems to talk about the remuneration for some of them. Elders must also be protected against false accusations. The long exhortation addressed to Timothy concludes with a focus on Christ and on God, the King of Kings

and Lord of Lords (6:13-16). The letter closes with a benediction (6:21): "Grace be with you" (plural).

Here is a broad outline of 1 Timothy:

Introduction 1:1-2

- I. The problem of false teachers (1:3-11)
- II. Praise of the mercy of God as revealed in Paul's life (1:12-20)
- III. Proper worship and church order (2:1-3:16)
 1. The prayer of the church (2:1-7)
 2. Men and women (2:8-15)
 3. Bishops (3:1-7)
 4. Deacons and deaconesses (3:8-13)
 5. Summary statement: the church and Christ (3:14-16)
- IV. False teachers contrasted with Timothy (4:1-16)
 1. The problem with false teachers (4:1-5)
 2. A charge to Timothy (4:6-16)
- V. Groups within the Church (5:1-6:20)
 1. Older people (5:1-2)
 2. Widows (5:3-16)
 3. Elders and Timothy (5:17-25)
 4. Slaves (6:1-2)
 5. False Teachers (6:3-10)
 6. The man of God (6:11-16)
 7. The rich (6:17-19)
 8. Timothy and false teachers (6:20-21)

Conclusion (6:21)

5. A Short Evaluation of the Various Arguments

We now turn to the suggested interpretations mentioned above and spend a few moments to evaluate them in the light of the principles for interpreting biblical texts.¹⁵

5.1. The Term "Wife" Should Be Understood Spiritually

The view that the term "wife" should be understood spiritually may have been suggested in order to defend priestly celibacy. The bishop is married to one woman, that is, the church.

It is correct that in some prophetic texts and especially in apocalyptic biblical literature the "term" woman is used metaphorically. For example, in Ezekiel 23 Israel and Judah are designated as two women and are called Oholah and Ohololiba. The woman of Revelation 12 represents

¹⁵ See also Nancy Vyhmeister, "The Bishop, Husband of One Wife: What Does It Mean?" *Ministry*, October 2005.

the church that is faithful to God, whereas the harlot Babylon of Revelation 17, also a woman, persecutes God's people and therefore is opposed to God.

However, in most texts the term "woman/wife" (*gynē*)¹⁶ refers to a female human being and not a symbolic entity. This is especially the case in legal material and in narratives. Biblical texts have to be interpreted literally if a symbolic meaning is not clearly indicated. ". . . there is no warrant for spiritualizing this part of the passage when every other term in the list is understood literally."¹⁷ A bishop is a human person that does not stand for a larger entity. So are his wife and his children. In addition, the other instances in which the term *gynē* is used in the Pastoral Epistles (1Tim 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14; 3:11, 12; 5:9; Tit 1:6) clearly refer to literal women only.

5.2. The Phrase is directed Against Polygamy

As far as we know, polygamy was not a major issue for the early church. In his discussion with the Pharisees on the matter of divorce (Matt 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12) Jesus used the creation account (Gen 1 and 2) to point to the indissolubility of marriage. By stressing the fact that two become one flesh—a man and a woman—he excluded among other things polygamy. Polygamy was not allowed for church members and therefore was also forbidden for a bishop. It was not "a live option for an ordinary Christian, much less for a minister."¹⁸

In addition, there is evidence that already in the first century B.C. polygamy was not encouraged in the Greek culture. It seems that there was a concern to prohibit it, as marriage contracts of that time indicate. In 212 A.D. monogamy became law for Romans.¹⁹ When Timothy received Paul's letters addressed to him he probably was pastoring in Ephesus, that is, in a context heavily influenced by the Greek culture. Thus, polygamy was not only prohibited by Jesus, but also frowned upon by the prevalent culture.

Hanson notes: "Anything approaching polygamy would have been abhorrent to the strict moral standards of the church of the time."²⁰ And

¹⁶ The Greek does not differentiate between "woman" and "wife" as the English language does by using two different terms. There is only one term in Greek (*gynē*) which covers both aspects. The precise meaning must be determined by the context. The same is true for the term "man/husband."

¹⁷ Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 122.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 75.

¹⁹ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 158.

²⁰ Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 78.

Lea/Griffin conclude: "Such a practice would be so palpably unacceptable among Christians that it would hardly seem necessary to prohibit it. It is best not so see Paul as writing primarily in opposition to polygamy."²¹

Furthermore, the phrase "husband of one wife" is used in the reversed form in 1 Timothy 5:9, namely "wife of one husband." Both phrases must refer to the same principle. But "wife of one husband" does not point to a prohibition of polyandry, "since polyandry was not practiced in the first-century Greco-Roman world."²² Therefore, it is not likely that the parallel phrase refers to polygamy.

5.3. Divorce and Remarriage Are Prohibited

The New Testament is clearly opposed to divorce. Apparently, remarriage after a divorce was an option for a spouse only that was not involved in sexual intimacy with someone else or a spouse who was divorced by an unbelieving partner. Since divorce is generally prohibited, it is argued that Paul would not repeat such a prohibition when talking about the qualifications of a bishop/elder. It was clear anyway. Therefore, this interpretation is not regarded to be very likely either. Lea/Griffin state: "While this can be Paul's meaning, the language is too general in its statement to make this interpretation certain."²³

Others suggest that divorce was a real problem and was taken lightly not only in Jewish society but also in the Greco-Roman world. Interestingly enough, the Gospel of Mark contains both the prohibition addressed to men against divorcing their wives and additionally the prohibition addressed to women against divorcing their husbands (Mark 10:11-12). The latter is not found in the parallel account in Matthew 19. While Jews considered it a privilege to be able to divorce their wives, in the Greco-Roman culture to which the Gospel of Mark obviously was addressed, divorce was also rampant and could be initiated by both spouses. Kent feels that in this context the divorce interpretation "is the most reasonable."²⁴

²¹ Lea, & Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 109. This is supported by Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 122-123, and Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 81.

²² Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 158.

²³ Lea, & Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 109.

²⁴ Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 125. See also Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 78. Some scholars suggest that a pre-conversion divorce is acceptable as long as the church leader is devoted to his present wife. Cf. E. Glasscock, "'The Husband of One Wife' Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2," *Biblica Sacra* 140 (1983): 255. Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 125, on the other hand, feels that "when men were to be considered for this high

5.4. The Bishop Must Be a Married Man

Whereas option (1) spiritualizes part of the text, option (4) takes the text very literally demanding that bishops/elders must be married as long as they serve as bishops/elders. This would mean that a man who is not married and who has no children, cannot serve as an elder. However, such an interpretation does not do justice to the larger context. Obviously, in the New Testament apostles were also regarded as elders. As fellow elder Peter addressed the elders of the churches (1Pet 5:1). The apostle John talked about himself as an elder (2John 1; 3John 1).²⁵ Paul himself was not married and yet served the churches and functioned as an apostle. He even suggested that under certain circumstances it would be better to remain single (1Cor 7:1-9, 27-28, 32-33).²⁶ Jesus was not married either. In 1Pet 2:25 he is called "bishop."

Kent notes: "Such an understanding does not properly represent the force of the adjective 'one' (*mias*) which is placed first. The overseer must be the husband of 'one' wife, not 'many.' Paul does not say he must be 'husband of a wife.'"²⁷

5.5. The Bishop Must Be a Married Man

The view that an elder may be married only once and may not remarry after the death of his spouse is accepted by a number of scholars.²⁸ If this is correct, the emphasis is on fidelity rather than on the issue of being married or not.

This option seems to be supported by 1Timothy 5:9-10, a passage which mentions widows, who are to be put on a certain list, and enumerates certain criteria for doing so. One of these criteria is "having been the wife of one man." This phrase is parallel to "husband of one

office, there must be no record of divorce or other marital infidelity in the candidate, even before conversion."

²⁵ See also Acts 1:20.

²⁶ Cf. Lea, & Griffin, Jr. 1, 2 *Timothy, Titus*, 109; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 157.

²⁷ Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 124. Cf. Newport J. D. White, "The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and the Epistle to Titus" in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (ed. W. R. Nicoll; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 111.

²⁸ Cf. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, 82. Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 77, lists some scholars who take this position. He also calls this view "the traditional explanation."

wife."²⁹ Such constructions—if appearing in the same document—should be interpreted in the same way unless clearly indicated otherwise. In 1Timothy both phrases should have the same basic meaning. Since in the case of the widows a second marriage seems to be excluded, it is reasoned that the same applies to the bishop.³⁰

Furthermore, "in Graeco-Roman society the woman who had remained with one husband all her life, or who when widowed had not remarried, was honoured. The epithet *unavira* ('married to the one man only') is often found on epithaphs."³¹

The problem with this view is that remarriage after the death of a spouse is not prohibited in Scripture, nor is it discouraged. It is not morally questionable. On the contrary, in 1Timothy 5:14 young widows are admonished to marry again. It would be unintelligible if Paul encouraged young widows to remarry, when in later years—if widowed again—they would be excluded from certain privileges for this very reason.³² Dibelius and Conzelmann conclude that even in 1Timothy 5:9 the prohibition of a second marriage "is improbable."³³ In Romans 7:2-3 and 1Corinthians 7:39 Paul states explicitly that widows are allowed to remarry.³⁴ This should also apply to the bishop/elder.

5.6. Marital Faithfulness Is Stressed

Option number 6 is more general than the other views and yet may include some of them. It is supported by a number of expositors. With the phrase "husband of one wife" Paul may have wanted to stress that "the overseer must be completely faithful to his wife."³⁵ He avoids any sexual immorality.³⁶ Knight suggests that this statement "positively affirms

²⁹ In both phrases the numeral "one" comes first followed a genitive ("man's" / "woman's") and finally the person to which the phrase refers ("woman" / "man"):

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------|-------|
| <i>Enos</i> | <i>andros</i> | <i>gynē</i> | (5:9) |
| <i>mias</i> | <i>gynaikos</i> | <i>andra</i> | (3:2) |

³⁰ Cf. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, 82.

³¹ Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 77.

³² Cf. Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 77; Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 123-124.

³³ Dibelius, 52. Discussing 1Timothy 5:9 the authors state: "The interpretation of this passage by Theodore of Mopsuestia is correct: 'If she has lived in chastity with her husband, no matter whether she has had only one, or whether she was married a second time' . . ." (p. 75). Cf. Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, 37.

³⁴ Cf. Lea, & Griffin, Jr. *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 109.

³⁵ Earle, "1, 2 Timothy," *EBC*, 364.

³⁶ Cf. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, 81.

sexual fidelity . . . It is analogous, therefore, to the command 'You shall not commit adultery' . . ."³⁷ The objection that this is required of all Christians is countered by the reply that other qualifications of the bishop mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 are also expected to be found in all Christians.³⁸

5.7. The Bishop Must Be a Man

This option not only stresses that the bishop/elder must be a man, but also holds that women are excluded from this office. The literalistic reading that the bishop must be a married man (view 4) is difficult to substantiate—as shown above. A similar reading that the bishop must be a man should also be approached with great caution. The phrase "husband/man of one wife/woman" is found three times in Scripture—1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6. The reversed phrase "wife/woman of one husband/man" occurs in 1 Timothy 5:9 as already mentioned.

The term *gynē* clearly refers to a woman. In Scripture and outside Scripture the term *anēr* normally designates a male person. There are a few exceptions in which the term is "used for the human species"³⁹ in general including both men and women. For instance, Matthew 12:41; 14:35; Romans 4:8; Ephesians 4:13; and James 1:8,12, 20,23; 3:2 are obviously not restricted to males only but encompass both genders. "Emphatic sexual differentiation . . . is mostly expressed in biblical Gk. by ἄρσεν and θῆλυ . . ."⁴⁰ When Jesus addressed the issue of divorce he used these terms to refer to man and woman (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6), in addition to *anēr* and *gynē* (Mark 10:11-12). In the three texts found in 1 Timothy and Titus the term *anēr* undoubtedly refers to a male, because it is used in conjunction with the term "woman/wife."

Still the questions must be raised, What does the phrase mean? What was Paul's intention when he penned the phrase? Did Paul intent to say that women are not allowed to be elders or was he trying to say something else?

Some students of Scripture point to 1Tim 2:11-15 to indicate that women cannot be elders because they are admonished to be silent and in full submission and are reminded that Adam was created first. Since this paper is not dealing with this passage, a few remarks must suffice. According to other places of Scripture and even Paul's own writings women did teach (e.g., Acts 18:24-26). They prophesied and prayed

³⁷ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 158.

³⁸ Cf. Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 77.

³⁹ Albrecht Oepke, "ἄνθρω, ἀνδρίζομαι" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), I:360.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

publicly (e.g., 1Cor 11:5) and some had leadership roles (e.g., Lydia, Phoebe). So 1Tim 2:11-15 must describe a special situation. In our summary of 1Timothy we noticed the problem of false teachings. The letter indicates that women were involved in it (1Tim 4:17; 5:11-15) as does 2Timothy 3:6. The busybodies of 1Tim 5:13 (*periergoi*) are even understood as practitioners of magic in Acts 19:19. Very attractive in this part of the world, Asia Minor, was the mother goddess cult. According to this teaching women were necessary to communicate absolute truth. They were considered meditators (therefore probably the stress on Jesus as the only mediator—2:5). Gnosticism would see Eve as the spiritual source of enlightenment. Supposedly she existed before Adam and was responsible for infusing life into him. Adam was deceived and lacked knowledge that Eve had. Some suggested even that Eve had intimate relations with the serpent or was the mother of Yahweh. These ideas may have been already existing in proto-Gnosticism. If this is the background and situation in Ephesus, it is understandable that Paul admonished women to be silent⁴¹ and accept that it was Adam, not Eve that was created first,⁴² and that it was Eve and not Adam that was deceived.⁴³ So would the problem some women created in Ephesus exclude all sincere women from leadership positions. The New Testament would deny that.

We return to 1Tim 3:2! If Paul wanted to stress that bishops/elders must be male, he just could have stated it. He could have said: "An overseer must be above reproach, a man/male, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach." Instead he declared: "He must be husband/man of one wife/woman." In this phrase the emphasis is on the word "one." Paul did not say that bishops/elders must be "husbands of a wife"—which would have allowed for a stronger emphasis on the term "husband"—but he said: "husband of *one* wife." This clearly excludes a position claiming that Paul focused on the maleness of the bishop/elder.

⁴¹ To be silent does not mean not to speak but not to get involved in disputes and controversial debates. See Angel M. Rodriguez, "1Timothy 2:12," <http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-nt-texts/1-timothy-212>, (accessed June 10, 2013).

⁴² Priority in creation does not necessarily mean much. Animals were created before human beings were, and yet they are not considered to be superior. If, however, it was taught that Adam was dependent on Eve and that she even gave him the spark of life, Paul must remind the women in Ephesus that they have left the biblical evidence.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion see Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), especially pages 73, 119-121, 159, 162).

He stressed the overseer's faithfulness toward his wife, not the fact that he had to be a man.

As the passage on the bishop should not be read in a literalistic way concluding that the bishop must be a married man with at least two children, thereby creating tensions with other parts of Scripture and Paul's own statements, so the phrase "husband of one wife" should not be used to conclude that this text teaches and commands that bishops/elders must be male. This is not the issue. The phrase discusses the relation of an overseer to his wife by stressing that he must be completely devoted and faithful to his wife.⁴⁴

The same expression "husband of one wife" occurs again in 1Timothy 3:12, this time used in connection with deacons. However, in the case of the deacons, whose office is discussed in verses 8-13, an insertion is found with verse 11.

| | |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1Tim 3:8-10 | Deacons |
| 1Tim 3:11 | Woman |
| 1Tim 3:12-13 | Deacons ⁴⁵ |

⁴⁴ This fits the context of 1Tim 2:11-15 well which seems to deal with husbands and their wives. See, Richard M. Davidson, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (ed. Nancy Vyhmeister; Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 278-281, where he argues that the passage is dealing with the husband-wife relationship and has close parallels to 1 Pet 3:1-7 and 1Cor 14:34-36.

⁴⁵ Here is a syntactical display of 1Tim 3:8-13 showing how the passage may be outlined and how the parts relate to each other:

Διακόνους ὡσαύτως

(1) σεμνοῦς,

(2) μὴ διλόγους,

(3) μὴ οἶνω πολλῶ προσέχοντας,

(4) μὴ αἰσχροκερδεῖς,

(5) ἔχοντας τὸ μυστήριον τῆς πίστεως ἐν καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει.

καὶ οὗτοι δὲ δοκιμαζέσθωσαν πρώτων,

εἶτα **διακονείτωσαν**

ἀνέγκλητοι ὄντες.

Γυναίκας ὡσαύτως (1) σεμνάς,

(2) μὴ διαβόλους,

(3) νηφαλίους,

(4) πιστάς ἐν πάσιν.

Διάκονοι ἔστωσαν (1) μιᾶς **γυναικὸς** ἀνδρες,

(2) τέκνων καλῶς προϊστάμενοι καὶ τῶν ἰδίων οἴκων.

οἱ γὰρ καλῶς **διακονήσαντες**

βαθμὸν ἑαυτοῖς καλὸν περιποιῶνται

καὶ πολλὴν παρρησίαν ἐν **πίστει** τῇ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

Verses 8-10 and 12-13 are quite parallel. Both passages talk about “deacons” which “serve as deacons” (noun plus verb) and about the importance of faith. One may gain the impression that both passages are complete in themselves, while a new and yet related thought is introduced in verse 11.

A literal translation of verse 11 begins as follows: “Women likewise must be serious/dignified/ worthy of respect . . .” Who are these women? Again there are several options:

- (1) They are women in general.⁴⁶ The term *gynē* can be rendered “woman” or “wife.” Greek uses one word to describe what in English is expressed with two separate terms. While English differentiates, Greek allows for two options. Therefore, theoretically verse 11 could point to women in general. However, the immediate context, which deals with the office of the deacon, does not fit this interpretation. Verse 11 hardly can be a description of Christian women in general.
- (2) These women are the wives of the deacons. This interpretation takes into consideration the immediate context, and some interpreters as well as Bible translators have chosen this option.⁴⁷ Verses 12-13 contain references to marriage and family, which make it possible that verse 11 refers to wives. However, the question arises why wives of the deacons are included when the office of the deacon is discussed, while wives of overseers are not mentioned when bishops are discussed (1Tim 3:1-7). Furthermore, Paul mentions criteria which these women need to meet. If the wives of deacons must meet certain qualifications, why are wives of bishops/elders not even mentioned nor their qualifications listed? This is all the more astonishing because bishops hold a “higher” office than deacons do. These considerations make it unlikely that women of deacons are described in verse 11.
- (3) These women are not wives of the deacons, but they are deaconesses.⁴⁸ There is no possessive pronoun that would directly

⁴⁶ This option is briefly mentioned by William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville, TN: Thomas, 2000), 203.

⁴⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 202-204, discusses options (2) & (3) extensively and favors the women as wives of the deacons. Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 96-97, seems to leave it open.

⁴⁸ Cf. Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe*, 85; Frances Young, *Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113; Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *EBC 10* (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 161; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 203-204. On page 210 he states: “While 1 Tim 3:11 was interpreted above to refer to deacons’ wives, it is also possible that it refers to deaconesses, not so much as an established order but as women involved formally and officially in serving the church.”

connect the women as wives to their husbands, the deacons.⁴⁹ While five qualifications of deacons are mentioned in verses 8-9 and two qualifications of deacons in verse 12, four qualifications of these women are listed in verse 11. Both paragraphs, the one on deacons and the one on the women begin in the very same way and are dependent on *dei . . . einai* (must be . . .) in verse 2:

Verse 2: "An overseer, then, must be . . ."

Verse 8: "Deacons likewise WORTHY OF RESPECT (*semnous*) . . ."

Verse 11: "Women likewise WORTHY OF RESPECT (*semnas*) . . ."

As in verse 8 a new category is introduced so also in verse 11. While the bishops and the deacons share the characteristics of managing well their children and their household and are no drunkards (verses 3, 4, 8, and 12), the bishops and the women share the qualification of being temperate (verses 2 and 11), and the deacons and the women have in common faith/being faithful (verses 9, 11, 13) and being dignified (verses 9, 11). The last qualifier of the women, "faithful in all things," "may be Paul's summary way of applying the qualities of a deacon to a deaconess."⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that a female deacon is also mentioned in Romans 16:1: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *diakonos* (servant/deacon) of the church at Cenchreae." Some interpreters suggest that Phoebe was serving in a general sense, as the word family is often used in the New Testament and that she did not occupy the office of a female deacon.⁵¹ However, the Greek is quite specific: *ousan diakonon tēs ekklēsiās* (being a deacon of the church). Obviously, Paul by using the phrase "being a deacon" instead of employing the verb *diakoneō* (to serve) or the noun *diakonia* (service) and by connecting it closely to a local church⁵² suggested to understand Romans 16:1 as pointing to a deacon in the narrower sense

⁴⁹ While the NASB remains neutral by translating "Women must likewise be . . .," the NIV has taken a position and interprets the verse: "In the same way, their wives are to be . . ." The NRSV follows the NASB and the NKJV the NIV.

⁵⁰ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 203.

⁵¹ Cf. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, "Are Those Things So?" in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (ed. M. H. Dyer; Berrien Springs: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 202-204; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 226.

⁵² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 787, states: ". . . the designation 'deacon of the church in Cenchreae' suggests that Phoebe served in this special capacity, for this is the only occasion in which the term *διάκονος* is linked with a particular local church."

of the word.⁵³ Interestingly, the male form as found in 1Timothy 3:8 and 12 is used in Romans 16:1, although it is applied to a woman. Schreiner proposes that “the use of the masculine noun *διάκονοι* also suggests that the office is intended.”⁵⁴ Mounce explains that the feminine form of the word *diakonos*, namely *diakonissa*, was not used in the first century A.D., but is found for the first time in the fourth century.⁵⁵ Obviously, the term was not available for Paul to employ. Therefore he had to resort to the male expression. This may also explain why he did not use it in 1Timothy 3:11, but chose to talk about “women” instead. If he had used *diakonos* in all three subsections of 1Timothy 3:8-13 the entire paragraph would seem to talk about the male deacons only without allowing us to see that he may have wanted to point to both male and female deacons.⁵⁶

In addition to being a deaconess, Romans 16:2 seems to indicate that Phoebe was a patron and likely a woman of wealth.⁵⁷ “There was a stronger tradition of women filling roles of prominence in this period than has previously been realized—women with titles, for example, ἀρχισυναγώγος or γυμνασίουαρχός (Gen 1:1 BGT) . . . and acting precisely as protectors and benefactors . . .”⁵⁸

⁵³ Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (WBC 38B; Dallas: Word, 1988), 886-887. That Phoebe was a female deacon is, e.g., supported by F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 457; K. Heß, “Dienen,” in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* (2 vols.; ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, & Hans Bietenhard; Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag R. Brockhaus, 1977), 1:187; Johnston, “Shapes of Ministry in the New Testament and Early Church,” in *Women in Ministry*, 50-51; Francis D. Nichol, (ed.), *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 volumes (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 6:649; Barbara E. Reid, “What’s Biblical about . . . Women Deacons?” *The Bible Today* 51/1 (2013): 51-53.

⁵⁴ Schreiner, *Romans*, 787.

⁵⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 202. Cf. Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Romans* (Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament 5; reprint; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1983), 565.

⁵⁶ Cf. Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe*, 85.

⁵⁷ Cf. the important discussion by Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 888-889; and also Schreiner, *Romans*, 788.

⁵⁸ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 888-889. See also the discussion on the role of woman during the time of early Christianity in Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Second ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 70-74; James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 249-252; Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Was Celsus Right? The Role of Women in the Expansion of Early Christianity,” in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. David L. Balch, & Carolyn Osiek; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 162-168.

Deaconesses are found quite early in church history, "especially because women needed assistance from those of their own sex in visitation, baptism, and other matters . . ." ⁵⁹ Obviously, biblical texts were understood in the way that it was legitimate to have female deacons. Around 110 A.D. in a letter sent by Pliny the Younger to emperor Trajan (epist. ad Traj, 96,8) two Christian ladies are called *ministrae*, which apparently points to deaconesses. ⁶⁰ Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* refer to deaconesses in the second and third centuries A.D. By the fourth and fifth century all the leading Greek Fathers know about deaconesses and mention them. ⁶¹ In many churches today deaconesses are well accepted including the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ⁶²

The apparent existence of women deacons in Scripture and later on in church history militates against the view that the phrase "husband of one wife" would mean that only men can function as deacons. Instead it

⁵⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 787.

⁶⁰ Cf. Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe*, 85; Johnston, "Shapes of Ministry in the New Testament and Early Church," in *Women in Ministry*, 51; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 210.

⁶¹ Cf. Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe*, 85; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 211-212. On page 211 he states: "The basic picture is that deaconesses perform some of the functions of their male counterparts; yet their duties are restricted to serving the needs of women in the church, including baptism and anointing, teaching the newly baptized, and going 'into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick . . .'"

⁶² In Appendix C of Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1998), 249, the following report is found: "In 1895 Ellen White recommended the ordination of women who would give themselves to a deaconess-type of work: 'Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church.'--RH, July 9, 1895. A number of women were ordained as deaconesses during Ellen White's Australian ministry. On August 10, 1895, the nominating committee at the Ashfield Church in Sydney rendered its report, which was approved. The clerk's minutes for that date state: 'Immediately following the election, the officers were called to the front where pastors Corliss and McCullagh set apart the elder, deacons, [and] deaconesses by prayer and the laying on of hands.' Several years later, in the same church, W. W. White officiated at the ordination of the church officers. The minutes of the Ashfield Church for January 7, 1900, state: "The previous Sabbath officers had been nominated and accepted for the current year, and today Elder White ordained and laid hands on the elders, deacon, and deaconesses.--AR, Jan. 16, 1986."

points to their marital faithfulness. The same phrase "husband of one wife" is used in connection with bishops/elders in the same context of 1Timothy 3. It cannot be interpreted differently from the identical expression found in 1Timothy 3:12. Since in the case of deacons this expression does not rule out deaconesses, in the case of bishops/elders this phrase cannot be used to claim that a bishop/elder has to be male. Obviously, the biblical text in 1Timothy 3:2 does not address the question whether or not women can serve as elders. This does not seem to be Paul's concern, and we should avoid reading it back into the text. Furthermore, we should refrain from using 1Timothy 3:2 as a divine command opposing the involvement of women in leadership positions of the church.

5.8. A Combination of Some of the Above Mentioned Views

Some combinations of views are quite unlikely, because they contradict each other, for instance, the views that an elder must be married and must not remarry. Others are more probable, for example, the views that the bishop should not live in polygamy, should not divorce his wife and remarry, and should be completely faithful to his wife. However, option number 8 is not stronger than its weakest individual part discussed above.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated the phrase "husband of one wife" as found in 1Timothy 3:2 and has pointed to its various interpretations. The fact that this phrase has been understood quite differently, alerts us to two issues: (1) A simple reading of the phrase may miss the point that the author wanted to make and may unintentionally allow the audience to read into the text their own agenda. (2) The multiplicity of interpretations may indicate that this text belongs to the more difficult ones in the New Testament and should be handled with great care.

Some of the above mentioned interpretations are quite improbable or even impossible, while others seem to make more sense. Obviously, literalistic interpretations lead to conclusions that are in contrast to Paul's own writings as well as the remainder of the New Testament. Single men or husbands with less than two children are not excluded from serving as bishops/elders. The hotly debated question whether or not a woman can be an elder does not seem to be addressed. Apparently 1Timothy 3:2

cannot be used to exclude women from the ministry of church leadership (bishop/elder).

The passages dealing with the bishop and the deacons do not provide much information on their functions, but stress their moral qualities, among them being "husband of one wife." Paul stresses that elders and deacons must live an exemplary life that includes their sexual relations. They must avoid "any appearance of immorality"⁶³ and be completely faithful to their spouse.

⁶³ Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 214; cf. Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 75.