

# Elders and Divorce

## Pastoral Letter from the Session of KPC

A statement of our position as we nominate prospective elders and deacons  
August 2004

For some years there has been a developing need for the Session of KPC to share our heart and thoughts with the body as to our position regarding elders and divorce. Among Christians with a knowledge and reverence for the Bible, the key passage regarding this is 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and the reference to being “*the husband of one wife*”:

*This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a <sup>1</sup>bishop, he desires a good work. <sup>2</sup>A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; <sup>3</sup>not <sup>2</sup>given to wine, not violent, <sup>3</sup>not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not <sup>4</sup>covetous; <sup>4</sup>one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence <sup>5</sup>(for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); <sup>6</sup>not a <sup>5</sup>novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. <sup>7</sup>Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the “snare of the devil.” (NKJV)<sup>1</sup>*

The key question is, “What does “*one wife*” mean?” Does it mean an elder must be married? Does it mean an elder can never have been divorced? Does it mean that an elder cannot be polygymist? It would be nice if the passage itself clearly answer the question but it doesn't. That said, it doesn't mean that we can find solid Biblical definition as we consider other passages of Scripture which speak to this same subject. Let's take the question one at a time and see if we can make headway:

### 1. *Does this mean that an elder must be married?*

There certainly is a strong connection made, even in this passage, between marriage and spiritual leadership. The Bible gives us a sound principle that the home is a learning and testing ground as far as spiritual leadership is concerned - *one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence*<sup>5</sup> (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?). Successful husbands and fathers have the raw material within them to make good elders for it's all about shepherding people whether that be in the home or the church. In fact, the church does well to look around herself and nominate those with strong family lives to the office of elder. It's one of the most important – and most often overlooked – criteria there is. That's it's also important to say that we need to apply wisdom with regard to nominating those with young children. The general pattern is that in an earlier season in our lives we tend to our children and then when we mature and our children are older – perhaps grown – our demands are less and our wisdom is greater. After all, the term “elder” means just that . . . older guy.

That said, it's hard to make the case that an elder must be married. Scripturally, both the Paul the Apostle and Jesus Himself were single. Now obviously, the case of Jesus is unique but still it cannot be completely discounted that he was both single and a great leader (The Greatest!). The case of Paul is a bit more instructive in that Paul was like us – an ordinary man. Yet, Paul was single (*1 Corinthians 7:7*). Some might object that Paul was an apostle which is true and a valid point. Some point out that no

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<sup>1</sup>*The New King James Version*. 1996, c1982 (1 Ti 3:1-8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

requirement with regard to apostles being married or single was ever laid down and yet it is clearly stated in the case of elders. Furthermore, one might argue that the role of apostle was unique in that they tended to travel and plant communities rather than actually shepherd them on a long term basis as elders do. Perhaps marriage and family life is a more important matter for those who do what elders do.

Those things being true, it's also fair to say that Paul held an even greater authority than elders do given that he was an apostle. If marriage wasn't a requirement for the highest office in the New Testament church then why do we think it would be a requirement for an office of less responsibility (elder).

Perhaps you begin to sense the dilemma – a clear cut answer is just not possible. In instances like this it become the responsibility of the elders and pastors to make the best judgment call they can on this. We have nominated and placed before single elders in the past whom you have elected to office. The current Session supports that position and we do not believe that elders must be married. We see an advantage to marriage but we also see an advantage to having single individuals serve as elders provided that they have demonstrated the same kind of relationship and leadership success that we ordinarily consider look for as we seek those who *“manage their households well”*.

2. *Does this mean an elder, if he is married, can never be divorced?*

Despite the sensibilities of our modern age this is a serious question for those who are serious about Scripture. No one like to be exclusive and less than gracious but we must honestly ask ourselves if this is what Scripture intends as it requires *“the husband of of one wife.”* Those who argue for this most conservative of positions tend to do so on a two part basis a) while we cannot know for absolute certainty with *“husband of one wife”* means no divorce ever, under any circumstances, b) we think the office of elder is so important to the church that we should never put the church into a position wherein she might ever appear to have anything less than the highest standards. It's in essence a “better to be safe than sorry” approach.

This has merits, strong merits. First of all, the seriousness of lifelong marriage is greatly enhanced and secondly marriage become even the model for the local church. Secondly, some question whether or not divorce in someone's past exposes a serious, though perhaps less than obvious, deficiency of character. Does failure in a marriage mean that someone is likely to fail in other critical relationships in the future? Other suggest that someone who has been divorced will have a weak conscience on the matter and have trouble holding others to Scriptural standards. These are hard questions – but they are the ones which must be dealt with.

The other side of the equation points out that there is such a thing as a “Scriptural divorce” (see Pastor Nate's book entitled *“Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage”* and the EPC Position Paper on the same). What about the man who's wife left him due to outright sin and he did everything in his power to reclaim the marriage but she still refused reconciliation? Scripture teaches that divorce under conditions such as these is lawful and the person can remarry with a free conscience. In fact, the Old Testament tells us that God “divorced” Northern Israel at a certain point in history (Jeremiah 3:8). If God carried out a divorce (though certainly one that met the Standards of Scripture), and we haven't disqualified Him from spiritual leadership, then how can we disqualify a person? You might counter that God's relationship with Israel was a “spiritual relationship” but isn't that what marriage is?

Ultimately, the Session of KPC finds it difficult to disqualify somebody from being an elder when their lives might conform to Scripture at every point – including how they handled a divorce. While we appreciate the quest for high standards and integrity among those who take the most conservative position described above, our conscience prohibits us from requiring more than what we believe Scripture teaches. While we affirm that while divorce is profoundly serious matter and any prospective nominee must be questioned closely on a past divorce and it's conformity to Scripture - and that it may even be advisable to talk to others about the matter, including the former wife, in order to assure absolute clarity on past events

– still we allow for those with a Biblical divorce to run for elder provided that they meet all Scriptural criteria.

3. *Does this mean an elder cannot be a polygamist?*

First of all, no Christian can be a polygamist (just to clear that matter up, in case anyone was wondering). There is a clear Scriptural case to be made regarding that but let's save that for a different day. However, what is clear in our day and age was not so clear in the pagan Roman world in which Paul was planting churches. Polygamy was part of the cultural landscape. At first blush it would seem that we've solved our problem. Perhaps this is what the Bible intended all along . . . elders can't be polygamists. They must be the husband of "**one wife**". That seems reasonable - in many ways more than reasonable.

The only real question with this is why the Bible would have outlawed polygamy only for elders and not everyone else. In other words, if the correct understanding of this passage is that elders can't be polygamists then does that mean that everyone else can be? Why state a clear command on this only for elders if not everyone is bound by this standard? Now the argument gets very complex and has to do with the willingness of the apostles to accommodate to their times on less than key issues. Look at this way, if Paul came in and said to be a Christian you can't be a polygamist then what about the man who wants to come to Christ and has two wives? Does he divorce one? Which one?

The general line of thinking has been that as Paul ministered in a setting where there were some people who had more than one wife he began the process of setting the standard of marriage to only one wife. To command it immediately would be to leave some women destitute and so instead he set marriage to only one woman as the standard for leaders (elders). His principle – God's principle – was that if he gotten marriage to one woman in the leaders and set it as a clear standard then polygamy would die out in the next generation. This appears to be what happened for the Roman world – as it became Christian – moved to the standard of marriage between one man and one woman.

*Summary and Conclusion*

So, where are we? Let's take it one point at a time:

1. Marriage and family are an excellent training ground for eldership. We should look for those who "**manage their households well**" and let them be the first we consider nominating. Consideration needs to be made for age, recognizing that the demands of being an elder and the demands of young children can be conflicting. As a side point, for those who are younger and raising their children consider these days as a valuable "leadership training institute".
2. While the general norm will be that of married elders, just as marriage is the general norm in the church, single elders are Biblically permissible. In fact, it is desirable to have 1 or 2 single elders on the session in order to represent the heart and concerns of those in the body who are single.
3. An elder can be divorced as long as it meets Biblical criteria. That said, the mandate to "**manage one's household well**" cannot be ignored. At a minimum this means that a prospective elder have a long and proven track record either of singleness or marriage subsequent to any divorce. Here in 1 Timothy 3 the Bible directs us to select only proven leaders and thus the home must be proven. Significant periods of demonstrated, community witnessed, marital success becomes the criteria of successful home relationships. While it is difficult to put a time frame and what constitute "enough time" it is difficult to imagine that it would be less than a decade. Especially when there has been a divorce, it is incumbent upon the church to be even more careful in her selections. This is to protect not only the church but the prospective elder and his family as well. The demands of spiritual leadership are high and the pressures are great.

4. What about a prospective elder who has a non-Biblical divorce but this dates back to his days before Christ? This is perhaps the most difficult question of all but we lay down two standards:
  - a. We hold that “*if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed and the new has come*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Therefore, we will consider candidates who fall into this category.
  - b. Consideration, however, will include the above mandated standard of proven marital success in a second marriage over a *considerable* period of time. If single, then those same standards of maturity, integrity, and relational success apply in a manner which is appropriate to singles.
5. We believe that we establish this criteria on solid Biblical reasoning which holds in tension the requirements for integrity, both public and private, with the Gospel of grace. We also believe that to the degree that the Session and the congregation ordain only those individuals to the office of elder who are proven, seasoned, and well known that we do well before the Lord. The question has been raised of multiple marriages – what should the church do if there have been more than two divorces? We believe that the public reputation of the gospel at this point becomes a greater concern than the merits of any individual nominee and would decline from placing that person before the congregation. There are many ways to serve in the Body of Christ and of greater importance than any individual is the best overall interest of the church.
6. We also believe that a background which includes divorce will be the minority – the extreme minority – of experience for those who serve as elder at KPC. We do so because we do not accept divorce as the norm of experience but rather as an exception to God’s intention in our lives and seek to have a leadership team which presents that picture. Our intentional purpose is to both model and build strong families who’s children never know the sorrow and confusion which are the inevitable companions to divorce. We are a family church and we are built around the family and thus strong, inspiring marriages.
7. We affirm all of these standards with regard to the office of deacon with one exception. We will consider as a prospective deacon an individual who has been through an unBiblical divorce but who has demonstrated a true spirit of repentance, a successful and Biblical lifestyle of remarriage or singleness for a length period (a decade or perhaps more), and feels a genuine call to the office on his life which the Session affirms. We recognize that we make a distinction in this which is not immediately apparent in the Scriptures but we do so for the following reason . . . the visibility and spiritual leadership of the office of deacon in the Presbyterian form of government is not as high as it is for the office of elder. Given that there is a clear distinction in the responsibilities of the office we make this distinction in criteria.
8. We affirm, once again, our love and support for every member of the Body at KPC who has been touched by divorce. We recognize that for many this is always a painful topic, even when it is restricted to the limited subject of who may serve as elder. We are grateful for the presence of the divorced at KPC. Your presence brings to us a clear reminder of God’s heart for those who have been hurt, the integrity evidenced in many of your lives as you have walked through pain with great grace and dignity, and the energy which so many of you bring to the shared life of our church makes us all richer. In many of your lives we have seen the highest scriptural standards evidenced as you have walked through events which would have left many unable to do so. You inspire us and tenderize us.
9. We recognize that these standards will eliminate some from consideration – some in body who are deeply loved, noticeably effective, and highly valued. We share a high regard for all those who effectively serve the local church and are grateful for your contributions. We remind you that there are many ways in which to significantly contribute to the body as a whole and we commend you in those directions. Indeed, many of those whom the Bible esteems most were never in positions of visible leadership and surely many of the greatest in the Kingdom are those who have no ordained position but who daily love and serve the Body of Christ here on earth.