Is Marriage Sacred?

Timothy Ross
Wednesday, June 29, 2016

The question of the marital status of these married persons is a question that has seen widely divergent answers over the years among the adherents of Christianity throughout the centuries. Ranging from the long history of demeaning the celibacy of priests and monks, to the common view that divorce of any kind disqualifies permanently from being ordained to the priesthood, to the view that a man must be married with children in order to qualify for a position of leadership in the church, views have been varied, and strongly held.

Naturally, when one turns to questions about church leaders, the whole church finds interest, and in many circles, the church finds reason to raise a higher standard for leaders than they would raise for themselves. I don't intend to solve all the controversies here. And I certainly can't speak definitively to questions that have divided the Christian community in the church. Humility is needed when teaching on topics so ground-level. But I would like to address one aspect of the question that is sometimes brought up. I think it may be helpful to some and confidence-building to others. Please bear in mind that this is not meant to be a guide for a leader in the church!

But let me share a few presuppositions that I hold first. I presume the authority of the Protestant Scriptures as an inspired and infallible word from God. And I also presume rather than defend the Protestant understanding of the Bible's teaching. I'm not a Bible scholar, but I have read the Bible many times, and I believe I know the ideas of the Bible well, but it is certainly possible that I could be mistaken. I also probably am a bias[1] further presume that Paul actually wrote 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus (often called "the Pastoral Epistles"), and that he meant what he seemed to mean, and that he was inspired in that point. Finally, I presume the basic historical background to the PE that is presented by Gordon Fee and expanded on by William Mounce, which identifies the Paul of the PE as a mature apostle, with a long history of Holy, and distinct by its response to the heresies that he encountered in Rio, but praises that Paul was still learning, and that he had learned much from his friend and Deuterio-mentor Apollos, who was based in Corinth at the time.

Defending each of these propositions would take numerous other blog posts, so I simply presume them here.

Must A Pastor Be Married?

The question I am asking is, "Must a pastor be married?" The question is typically the result of an interpretation of an interpretation phrase in Paul's Qualifications for elders[2] in 1 Timothy and Titus. The phrase in Titus is the "husband of one wife" which some read to mean "A pastor must be married to a woman." But is that what the phrase itself means, or is it something else?

"The Husband Of One Wife" Phrase Could Mean "Must Be Married"

Paul spells out what many later called "qualifications for pastors" in both his first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:1-7) and his letter to Titus (Titus 1:5-9). Some pastor's qualifications include the requirement that a pastor be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6). What exactly does this phrase mean? William Mounce explains:

> This phrase is one of the most difficult phrases in the PE, and yet it is one of the most significant because the expression forbid bigamous Christian marriage (1 Tim 4:1-3; 2:15) and sexual promiscuity is a serious problem (see on 2 Tim 3:6). That it is first on the list after distichologiaiis, as it is in Titus 1:6 (after mentioning the elder's reputation), suggests the marital faithfulness is a major concern in Ephesian church. Paul repeats this same qualification in Titus 1:6 and in 1 Tim 5:9 (to deacons). The emphasis is on the husband, not on the wife. (Mounce, Pastoral Epistles, Word Bible Commentary, Mounce, 90 (2000), Pastoral Epistles Word Bible, p. 105).

He then goes on to say that, in his view, Paul, different way than the phrase has been interpreted throughout Church history. To summarize his longer explanation, the phrase has been taken to mean that a pastor:

1. Must be married
2. Must be married to a woman at once (i.e., must not be a polygamist)
3. Must be faithful to his spouse
4. Must have been married only once, except in the case of a previous wife dying and relieving him to marry anew.
5. Must never have been divorced

It provoke Mounce's Comments on Tim. 3:2b at length here, with some of the lengthy references to exercise removed, and modernized for clarity:

> There are four basic interpretations. Proponents of each interpretation often claim their reading of the text is the only possible one. The Calvinists Bengel has since this argument can be applied to all of the four interpretations (i.e., not the first). It carries no weight. It is also said that the adherents of the expositor usually are persuaded by a specific interpretation, but the same argument can be applied to all interpretations. Paul could have said (clearly) "Dr. Mounce" (Ed. Mounce's grammar), "Dr. Hurley" (Ed. Hurley's grammar) or "Dr. Mounce's grandmother." (1) The interpretation that the phrase means that an overseer must be married should be rejected (contra the Eastern Christian practice). It is more doubtful that it means that a man must be married and "woman." The circumstances are as follows:
>
> (a) the phrase, if it means, is the only place that only "one," and not on the marital status, (b) Paul and Timothy would not be eligible to be overseers, (c) most adult men were married and have been married for a long time. (d) A better state for church workers of they have the gift. 1 Cor 7:17, 20–38).
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> (2) the phrase, if it means, is the only place that only "one." and not on the marital status, (b) Paul and Timothy would not be eligible to be overseers, (c) most adult men were married and have been married for a long time. (d) A better state for church workers of they have the gift. 1 Cor 7:17, 20–38).
>
> (3) The interpretation that this verse forbids polygamy and bigamy concubines is stronger than might be expected from a mostly universal interpretation.
>
> (4) Others argue that the phrase means an overseer must be faithful to his wife, even if he was previously divorced.. Scott paraphrases, "A bishop must be an example of strict morality" (19). Lock argues that the phrase "rules out the case of a man who has married a second time after divorce." This would allow for the possibility of an overseer being remarried after a death divorce, or possibly adultery in the distant past but would disallow polygamy and sexual immorality (even if the overseer were not married, since the problem would be so long stringent for the ancient Mediterranean. Spicq claims that Christianity has also taken advantage of being a positive way of stating the requirement (as opposed to the Jewish and Greco-Roman standard that parallels the rule of a polygamous husband of the wives). The real question is if the Greek can possibly give this meaning. Kelly says that "Ignorance of Greek idiom has led to the view that the phrase means that the candidate must be married. But Greek has no "husband" and "wife" phrase, and it requires the pronoun "his." Kelly says that when the same phrase (in reverse) is applied to widows (1 Tim 5:9) he thinks that it means not only fidelity but also celibate a second marriage. Kelly says that the phrase "is a very strong way of saying "no" rather this interpretation by saying that it refers to fidelity since the time of conversion.
>
> (5) The final interpretation which does grant a married requirement is the most. "Since it does an overseer can only have been married once. This was the position of the early church (see discussion in Dodd, BT 29 (1978), 92–95).

This interpretation can be subdivided into two views. Some argue that the phrase prohibits a second marriage for an overseer under any condition, whether the first marriage ended by death or divorce... Others argue that the phrase prohibits a second marriage if the first ended by divorce. The latter position has appeared in the geographic tradition of the church since at least the Apostolic Constitutions, remaining (cf. Mart Polk, Bern 31-5; 1 Cor. 15), (this is nothing in our passage that suggests or supports either position. Scholars who believe the Christian practice of the second marriage is a forced separation, and says that the passage speaks of the person "now separated from his spouse, who has married another." He follows the Scholars in assuming that the reason for the rule is the expression of the relation of Christ to the church" (30) and therefore a prohibition against remarriage after death or divorce. He argues that the Christian practice of the second marriage is a forced separation. (William D. Mounce, Pastoral Epistles, Word Biblical Commentary, (Dallas Word, Incorporated: 2000), 96-170-171)

So summarize that longer explanation, the phrase could mean that a pastor must be married, and that a pastor must be faithful to his spouse, but the interpretations, the one preferred by Mounce, and the one he rejected. These other things were being said about the idea of pastoral qualifications in the church:

> 1 They are all specifically aimed at the false teachers in Ephesus as an ad hoc attack, and should not thus be overinterpreted.
>
> 2 Paul's concern is for Christian, and they mirror similar lists of lists morality from the larger Greco-Roman world of the time. Paul's lists of virtues have basically presented similarity with morality lists cited by elders Elliott, don't 'pick a pear' on such basic issues.
>
> 3 Paul's concern is for the moral character of the elected person, were an binary, black and white "this or that" qualifications, which is arising argument for "husband of one wife" (literally, "a one-woman man") is not necessarily a one-woman kind of guy.

Mounce lists five reasons (altered for rejecting the "must be married" interpretation of the phrase in particular, which I reproduced and edited for clarity:

> 1. The emphasis of the phrase is clearly on the word "one" not the word "husband." This one would make the word "one" instead of the main point, an entirely superfluous addition.
> 2. Paul and Timothy themselves would be disqualified from being in Ephesus. Paul's trip to Macedonia Mounce argues indeed that they dwell within the least practicing of Bishop. Paul was an apostle and Timothy was a young man. Paul would be setting up a qualification that he and Timothy would not themselves meet. This is especially so given the situation with the false teachers in Ephesus, against whom every word of Paul's letter is aimed. Paul's opponents largely in view in the Pastoral Epistles were men who would not Such a qualification as this one was again would work against the entire point of the letter to Timothy and Titus.
> 3. It is strangely the opposite of what Paul says about the value of singlehood for ministry elsewhere (See 1 Cor 7:17, 20–38 and below).
> 4. If we are to take the instructions this way, it also demand that Christian pastors have multiple living children, an incredibly unlikely thing to require (notice that Paul speaks in the plural of the bishop's children). Christian bishops in the world only one child. Our rule of thumb should with he had never gone into ministry! (Ed. is indeed referenced on that while they are married, they are not to be married to more than one wife at a time, and that if they are in a case, marry after repentance is finding have had only one wife in a polygamous marriage.
> 5. In the culture Paul was writing into, almost all adult men would have been married already. The Christian dignity given to singlehood by Jesus had worked against the grain of the culture. Paul would be arguing a most point here, and one that worked against what Jesus had established in concerning his own ministry. (Mark 10:29-30).
> 6. It would disqualify Jesus himself from being a Bishop. Jesus had single his entire life on earth. Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, the Bishop of our souls, would be disqualified. Jesus, the Lord of all, John was the Kingship. I presume the marriage is not having bypassed on the Jesus's first-hand reading of metaphors in a little silly hermeneutically (but not more so than taking reading 1 This is). Let marriage be a bishop (or marriage) is not a requirement. Jesus, the Lord of all, John was the Kingship. I presume the marriage is not having bypassed on the Jesus's first-hand reading of metaphors in a little silly hermeneutically (but not more so than taking reading 1 This is).

Why The "Pastors Must Be Married" Notion Prevails In America

All of this leads us to wonder, Why do Christians today think we require a pastor to be married? The reason when it happens today, likely has a source in another element of current North American culture. Sam Allberry is a British Anglican pastor who lives in New York City, and he has written a book called 7 Myths about Singleness: How the Church Undervalues and Mistreats Single Christians. He argues that the idea of a single pastor's perspective, because this is such a rare species in the US, makes people think that the relation notion has become popular in the US. He has worth noting here:

> The first is that pastors must be married to have the experience to minister to married couples. But this does not follow.
>
> Yes, a married man will have made experiences that will inform and aid his ability to minister to married church members, but that experience is not the only one that matters. Singleness will be very different to that of great value to my church. It is not ultimately our personal experience that qualifies us to teach into a given situation (though it can undoubtedly help). It is our handling of the Word of God. It is, we all, our wisdom that we are willing to share, that our lives have been lived in such a way as to provide some additional first-hand insights into how to teach, but it will not be determinative. No pastor has experienced all the things on which he will be required to teach.
>
> – Sam Allberry

Just think through what that standard would mean in other areas. He is pointing out that assumption Christians make that the kingdom of heaven "Jesus certainly didn't endorse celibacy for ministers." "They haven't been married, so they couldn't pastor married people." But this is a ridiculous standard. Is your married pastor who had not been married to his wife could be to cure for the widowed? Is your single pastor who has never been divorced thus unable to parse the many (maybe half or so) divorced couples in your church? Is your married pastor who has never been through part of your life's troubles does that mean he is incompetent to parse a family containing a child with special disabilities? And so on.

The experience that matters to the pastoral is not that he has had this control one of life or that we believe passing, but that he has discipled God and has the ability of Scripture. His experience is what God has to bring to the pastor as he shares his, not his experience in each and every mode of life.

> "It is not ultimately our personal experience that qualifies us to teach into a given situation (though it can undoubtedly help). It is our handling of the Word of God."
> – Sam Allberry
> (Tweet This)

Second, Allberry notes what is probably the more common root of this mistaken notion:

> The pastoral ministry has taken many forms within mainstream Christianity. It is not unusual for there must be something among with someone if they is to be married. It is one thing to have a group pastor in 20s, who is not married (and the Christian tradition it wasn't for long before it is not) but another to have one who is, say, over 35, and still not married. In much of our evangelical culture, that strikes many people as being not just unusual, but weird, and maybe even a little suspicious.
>
> This gets to the heart of what is often the real issue when we think about pastors being married: we see marriage as a right of passage into being of adult. It is from a Christian perspective, the elementary form of Christianity is a more mature form. It is (we so easily assume) a sign that someone has matured in Christ, and therefore, we assume, it is a sense that Christ has provided in our churches that are deliberately avoiding marriage out of some form of laziness or fear of commitment. As a result, we tend to think of why would someone want to pastor a young person. (And it is worth saying that I know men who have married out of a form of laziness and a fear of commitment, thinking that a wife will take care of them and facilitate a lifestyle of ongoing adolescence.

Our problem is not actually with single pastors. Our problem is with singleness itself, which I would suggest is itself a sign we not just close enough attention to what the New Testament has to say on the matter."
– Sam Allberry

Discernment Against Singles

The Church today in North America desperately lacks a solid Biblical theology of singleness, and as a result often discriminates in painful ways against single and married women. It is a sense that Christ provided an singlehood which I would beg married couple in every church to watch (series tag or below). Sam explained that discrimination against single women and women today, not only in the world but in the church, is a sense that Christ provided an singleness. Yet this is contrary to the message and teaching of Jesus.

Paul On The Value In Ministry Of Singles

Paul of course seem on to say much the same things Jesus did at greater length. To take a few snippets from his thoughts on the matter in Corinthians:

> *"I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*
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> *A To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.*
>
> *28 I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have trouble in the flesh, and I would spare you that.*
>
> *27 I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 28 But the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife. 34 And his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. 35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly and to secure undivided devotion to the Lord.*
>
> *38 So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.*
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> *40 Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*
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> – 1 Cor. 7 ESV

Tom Schwen reflects on Paul's theology as it comes to interest with singleness and marriage, and concludes:

> "One of the most surprising elements of Paul's theology is his view of being single. The typical Jewish view, informed by Genesis 2:18–25, was that being alone was not good and that being a single person was a deficiency to be remedied as quickly and fully as possible. Paul, with his Jewish background, is the first religious singleness is based that being married (1 Cor. 7:1–7, 25–35, 39–40). Paul's celibate seems strange even to many today, and to his Jewish contemporaries it must have been alarming. It was not only that he advocated that not wise to be married, but that he, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul responds to Corinthians related based avoidance, and we must take this into account in assessing Paul's view of marriage. Clearly Paul is an ascetic, and he sees a tension between that some are gifted by God to live as singles and some to live as married (1 Cor.7:7). These two gifts are not equally valued by Paul, who says that the married person "is divided" (1 Cor. 7:33) and "will have trouble in the flesh" (1 Cor. 7:28). It is "better" for those with strong sexual desire to get married (1 Cor.7:9, 36).
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> Despite the high regard for marriage, however, Paul prizes the single state as the better one and as a gift from God (1 Corinthians 7:7). Paul's reasons for this are clear: the single person is free to focus on God (1 Cor. 7:32–35). Paul does not say that God will not also in some cases, the gift of sound doctrine should stay single (1 Cor.7:37) for a reason from sexual relations is a good thing (1 Cor. 7:5). This is contrary to many modern who believe that pressure to marry is based on sexual relations and who sometimes suggest that people who refrain from sexual intercourse are abnormal. Paul does not mention sexual desire outside of marriage (1 Cor.7:2), but he does say that it is inspired by the Spirit of God (1 Cor.7:40).

When we consider Paul's understanding of the single state, it is clear that he does not view social relations according to the standards of the existing society. Singleness is prized because the single person can focus on God. Yet the single state is not important or arrogant, but the Jewish conception of marriage for all is radically relativized. Marriage is a gift of God, intended for many, probably most. But many are called to be singles for the sake of the kingdom, and singleness, not marriage, is the relationship, the marriage, though not denigrated, are subordinate to the glory of God, the centrality of Christ and the spread of the gospel."

– Thomas R. Schwenn, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ A Pauline Theology*, Downers Grove, IL, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015, Kindle Edition, p. 195.

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Jesus On The Dignity Of Singles

In the culture in which Jesus lived, there was a stigma placed on single-hood. Yet Jesus dignified singles, especially those who sacrificed their single life to serve effectively some cause.

> *"If the disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."*
> *10 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 11 For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mothers's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."*
> – Mt 19:10-12 ESV

Yet Jesus is addressing more than just physical eunuchs is clear when he refers to those who "made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven." Jesus certainly didn't endorse self castration. He is talking rather about the choice to endure the sufferings and pain of single-hood in order to further the kingdom of God. Use of the term "eunuch" is meant to convey the idea of a physical condition and forms of dignity (those with physical reasons that require singleness, those who have endured abuse forcing them to be single, and those who have chosen the single life for the sake of the kingdom) Yet in each case, the eunuch

> *"To the one of an "eunuch" language seems unhelpfully extreme when talking about those who could not marry for reasons of sex, and the rhetorical exaggeration of the eunuch's castration is clear from the context and the verb "to make a eunuch" (ektemō) within this one verse makes it the more uncomfortable. But the word eunuch here has a very different meaning from Jewish culture, in which eunuchs were the object of pity if not horror. Since the Jewish culture of the time, because of this striking metaphor perhaps reflects a Greco-Roman context, the proposition that some men are made eunuchs for the kingdom of God is not that strong language is needed to question that assumption. The "deformity" in that culture of a castrated man was not his sexual inability, but his inability to father children. Jesus's point is that between male and female, Jesus's point is turned against the Greco-Roman culture's background."*
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> – R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co, 2007), 724.

Jesus's point is that between male and female, Jesus's point is turned against the culture's background. Yet he also says that some people will be single for the sake of the kingdom of God for which purpose would you such a point? (Craig S. Keener, The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, p. 2015). The Christian community is called to be a place to which we serve as a culture that designs the single Christian life Craig Blomberg adds perspective:

> "If many Roman Catholics have easily exalted celibacy as an ideal, most Protestants have drastically underestimated the value of singleness. Contemporary Western culture has exalted sex and romance. Christians, who must live in this culture, are easily influenced by the assumptions of this culture. It is exactly the constantly pressure people into having marriages, the church desperately needs to encourage of who some God-leading Persons to remain single. Jesus's teaching has a short passage of some, to remain faithful to his guidance."
>
> – Craig Blomberg, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 222-94.

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"One of the most surprising elements of Paul's theology is his view of being single. The typical Jewish view, informed by Genesis 2:18–25, was that being alone was not good and that being a single person was a deficiency to be remedied as quickly and fully as possible. Paul, with his Jewish background, is the first religious singleness is based that being married (1 Cor. 7:1–7, 25–35, 39–40). Paul's celibate seems strange even to many today, and to his Jewish contemporaries it must have been alarming. It was not only that he advocated that not wise to be married, but that he, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul responds to Corinthians related based avoidance, and we must take this into account in assessing Paul's view of marriage. Clearly Paul is an ascetic, and he sees a tension between that some are gifted by God to live as singles and some to live as married (1 Cor.7:7). These two gifts are not equally valued by Paul, who says that the married person "is divided" (1 Cor. 7:33) and "will have trouble in the flesh" (1 Cor. 7:28). It is "better" for those with strong sexual desire to get married (1 Cor.7:9, 36).

Despite the high regard for marriage, however, Paul prizes the single state as the better one and as a gift from God (1 Corinthians 7:7). Paul's reasons for this are clear: the single person is free to focus on God (1 Cor. 7:32–35). Paul does not say that God will not also in some cases, the gift of sound doctrine should stay single (1 Cor.7:37) for a reason from sexual relations is a good thing (1 Cor. 7:5). This is contrary to many modern who believe that pressure to marry is based on sexual relations and who sometimes suggest that people who refrain from sexual intercourse are abnormal. Paul does not mention sexual desire outside of marriage (1 Cor.7:2), but he does say that it is inspired by the Spirit of God (1 Cor.7:40).

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As Schreiner notes, most believers will marry, and will fulfill their calling to God in marriage. Yet we dare not allow this "normal" circumstance to cause a denigration of those who fulfill their calling to God single. Men and women who have never married can still be called of God to serve in various ways, and when he decides he wants them in their fields, we dare not tell him that we think they are not good enough. To be sure, there are a number of required qualifications for the office of a Bishop/Elder/Past (I take these all as one role) given to us in the Bible; but being married is *not* one of them. Paul of course understands that singles may face extra challenges in a sex-saturated world (I highly recommend resources like "Soul Virgins: Redefining Single Sexuality" to help singles maintain purity as defined in Scripture rather than culture). But they also, as he notes, bring unique *benefits* to the Church. The Church shouldn't shun the gifts they have to offer as a result of their marital state. They should reach out to fill the gaps in their need for community, and welcome the unique gifts they can offer to the Body of Christ.

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