

Reconsidering 1 Timothy 3:12

Introduction:

Many thanks to the elders and to you for this extra time to make an elder presentation this morning. The ushers are passing out the sermon notes and if you are watching on the Livestream, you can find a copy of the notes on the website:

- www.hbcjc.org
- Resources
- Sermon notes and CG material
- Reading Through the New Testament

We are here this morning to do a congregational-wide, in-depth study of a particular text in the Bible. This is because,

1 – Several years ago as Heritage contemplated the elder-led model for our congregation, the study team identified an issue that once again came to light as our elders began to study the office of deacons. We began our study in an effort to better support and help the deacons fulfil their biblical place in the church. In doing so, we began with the qualifications for deacons which state,

1 Timothy 3:8-13 - *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

- 1 – Dignified
- 2 – Not double-tongued
- 3 – Not addicted to much wine
- 4 – Not greedy for dishonest gain
- 5 – Tested first
- 6 – Proven blameless
- 7 – The husband of one wife
- 8 – Managing their children and their own households well

and this particular verse, 1 Timothy 3:12 – *“Let deacons each be the husband of one wife,”* came under consideration.

2 - Heritage has historically interpreted that phrase to mean that a deacon candidate could not be divorced. At present, our by-laws state:

“Deacons must meet the scriptural qualifications described in 1 Timothy 3:8 – 13 and be a member in good standing.”

And the Deacon Nominee Questionnaire interprets that as:

“Have you ever been divorced or unfaithful to your wife?” _____ **I Timothy 3:12.**

3 - The elders are asking the congregation to re-evaluate our church’s interpretation of this text in an effort to best reflect the original intent of the passage. In so doing, it would mean that a man who is “the husband of one wife,” even though previously divorced, might serve as a deacon at Heritage.

4 – For the elders, this is a doctrinal issue and not a functional or practical one.

- We are not asking the church to reconsider this text because we need deacons or are finding it difficult to get men to serve. Our congregation has been richly blessed with men who are willing to serve the body as deacon
- Nor are we asking the church to reconsider the text because the times have changed, and more people are divorced.
- Nor do the elders perceive this request as the first step in a slippery slope away from a conservative stance on Scripture and the first step toward a moderate stance on the Bible. We perceive it as moving toward the Scripture and a desire to interpret as best we can.

5 – The elders humbly ask the church body to reconsider its stance on this text acknowledging that we, as elders, have rested in a traditional interpretation of this passage.

6– To ask you affirm this change, the elders would like to walk you through some of our study of 1 Timothy 3:12, in fulfilment of our calling to “*devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word*” (Acts 6:4).

First: Let’s look at the word ‘deacon’ in the original Greek.

It appears in the New Testament as a verb and a noun. For instance,

Mark 10:45 - *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve*

a) “*diakoneo*,” the verb is used 37 times as “*serves, served, serving, service*”)

Matthew 4:11, 8:15, 20:28, 25:44, 27:55; Mark 1:13, 31, 10:45; 15:41; Luke 4:39, 8:3, 10:40, 12:37, 17:8, 22:26, 27; John 12:2, 26; Acts 6:2, 19:22; Romans 15:15; 2 Corinthians 3:3, 8:19, 8:20; 1 Timothy 3:10, 3:13; 2 Timothy 1:18; Philemon 1:13; Hebrews 6:10; 1 Peter 1:12, 4:10, 11.

b) “*diakonos*,” the noun used 34 times, normally as “servant” or “minister.”

Matthew 20:26 - *But whoever would be great among you must be your servant*

Matthew 20:26, 22:13, 23:11; Mark 9:35, 10:43; John 2:5, 9, 12:26; Romans 13:4, 15:8, 16:1; 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6, 6:4, 11:15, 23; Galatians 2:17; Ephesians 3:7, 6:21; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:7, 23, 25, 4:7; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12, 4:6.

We believe that all Christians are called to serve in the model of the ultimate deacon, Jesus. There is a sense in which we are all deacons of Christ and his church.

- c) But in 3 NT texts, the word, *diakonos (diakono)* - is used as a noun to describe an office:

1 Timothy 3:8 - *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.*

1 Timothy 3:12 - *Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.*

Philippians 1:1 - *To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.*

As such, the office of deacon is one of two offices in the church, the other being elders.

Second: Interpretations of 1 Timothy 3:12

“Let deacons each be...

ESV – *“the husband of one wife”*

KJV – *“the husbands of one wife”*

NAS – *“husbands of one wife”*

NIV – *“faithful to his wife”*

Διάκονοι / *diakono* = *deacons*

ἔστωσαν / *estosan* = *must be*

μῆος / *mias* = *of one*

γυναικός / *gynaikos* = *wife* / literally “woman/wife” (depending on the context – Acts 8:12)

ἄνδρες / *andres* = *husbands* / “literally, “males/husbands (depending on the context – Acts 8:12)

Acts 8:12 - *But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men (ἄνδρες) and women (γυναῖκες).*

The most exact interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:12, is

- *“deacons must be one-woman men”*
- *“deacons must be one-wife husbands”*

There are at least five possible interpretations:

- a) Polygamous men cannot serve as deacons – Heritage agrees.
- b) Never-married men cannot serve as deacons – Single men have served at Heritage.
- c) Widowed men cannot serve deacons – Heritage allows widowed men to serve.
- d) Divorced men cannot serve deacons – Our historical stance.
- e) Married men who are married to only one woman at the time of their consideration can be deacons. – The elder’s proposal.

This is the elders’s interpretation. It means, single men, widowed men and biblically divorced men can serve as deacons.

Third: The Greek phrase alone is generic, but there are clues to help us:

1. The text says is, “*Deacons must be the husband of one wife.*”

To insert divorce into the interpretation, we must add, “*ever,*” or “*only.*” We must add to the qualification and factor in something that is not in the text. This could be historical context, tradition or personal experience.

2. If Paul wanted to say that deacons should not be divorced, he could have easily said, “*Deacons must not be divorced,*” or “*Deacons must have never been divorced.*” He does not say this and that’s important. He didn’t say it because he was thinking of something else.

3. The tense of the verse

V 8 - “*Deacons likewise must be...*”

ἑστῶσαν = *estosan* = *be* = present, active, imperative.

- a) present = now
- b) active = visible
- c) imperative = required

In other words, the text only speaks to a man’s present character. Is he a “*one wife husband?*” It doesn’t speak to his past marital relationships. In fact,

4. Each of the requirements / personal characteristics is in the present tense.

Each of the other requirements for deacons in 1 Timothy 3 – “*dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy, tested first, blameless,*” all point toward the present character of potential deacons rather than their past lives.

No one asks, “*Has this man ever behaved in an undignified way? Has he ever gossiped? Has he ever been drunk? Has he ever been greedy?*”

Consistency of all the characteristics requires that “*the husband of one wife*” receive the same treatment as the other requirements which are tests of a man’s present character and not his past.

Each of the requirements really answers the “*good repute*” qualification of Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:2 – “*Therefore an overseer must be above reproach... Deacons likewise must be...*” (3:8).

Fourth: There are other helps that are external to the text –

a) Jesus permits divorce for adultery which frees a person to remarry

Matthew 19:9 - *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.*

- Jesus states that adultery frees a person to remarry – “and marries...”. Jesus considers your second or next marriage a true, biblical, legal marriage.
- If your divorce was based on adultery, you are not committing adultery to remarry.

This means, on the condition of adultery, people are biblically free to divorce and remarry. Biblical remarriage means a husband can only have one wife at a time and meets the 1 Timothy 3:12 qualification as “*the husband of one wife.*”

b) The apostle Paul allows divorce for abandonment which frees a person to remarry

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 & 15 - *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.*

- Doesn’t that say a separated woman cannot remarry? Yes it does. A woman in Paul’s time could not divorce a husband. Only husbands could divorce wives. But she could leave, runaway, etc. In that case, she’s still married and cannot remarry.

And a husband must not divorce his wife....15 - But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace (See Ro 7:2-3 & 1 Cor 7:39).

If you are abandoned, you are “*not bound,*” which is another word for “free” and you are free to remarry. In that case, Paul does not say “*she/he must remain unmarried.*”

The apostle did not say, “*You are free from the marriage but not free to remarry*” because being biblically free from a marriage enables you to remarry.

This means, on the condition of abandonment, people are biblically free to divorce and remarry. If biblically remarried, a husband can only have one wife at a time and meets the 1 Timothy 3:12 qualification as “*the husband of one wife.*”

- It seems unlikely that Jesus and Paul would afford men an option for divorce and then disqualify them for using that option.

In either case – adultery or abandonment, a man is free to remarry, is truly married and is “*the husband of one wife*” (1 Timothy 3:12).

c) OT divorce enabled women to remarry

Deuteronomy 24:1-4a - *When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD.*

1 - The “indecency” of Deuteronomy 24:1 = “fornication” or adultery. In other words, Moses gave women certificates of divorce if adultery was committed, and this freed them to remarry, otherwise, innumerable people in Israel would be living in adultery.

2 - Moses affirmed that a divorced woman became “*another man's wife.*” So, anyone with a certificate of divorce, was really, biblically remarried. In such a case, a divorced man would qualify as “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12).

(Why can't she go back to her first husband? He accused her of “some indecency,” i.e., adultery).

3 – Jesus himself reaffirms the OT basis for divorce and remarriage

There were two primary schools of thought in the Hebrew 1st century of Jesus. *Beit Shammai* held that a man may divorce his wife only for a serious transgression, but *Beit Hillel* allowed divorce for even trivial offenses, such as burning a meal.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houses_of_Hillel_and_Shammai) Accessed 20 August 2021.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, he reminded them of the biblical basis for divorce –

Matthew 5:31 - *It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

Jesus affirmed remarriage based on adultery and...

4 The woman at the well is an example of someone Jesus says remarried biblically

John 4:18 - ...*you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.*

In this statement, Jesus legitimizes all five marriages of this woman. She, according to Jesus, had “five husbands.” He differentiates between her “five husbands” and the man she is living with who is “*not your husband*.” If she was not biblically married to these men in Jesus’s sight, he would have said,

“You have been married to one man, lived with four men and the one you have now is not your husband.”

Her divorces biblically dissolved any previous marriages and freed her to remarry in Jesus’s sight.

If indeed, biblical divorce frees a person to remarry, then a person can, as Moses and Paul state, have only one wife at a time; be “*the husband of one wife*.” This qualifies a divorced man to serve as a deacon (1 Timothy 3:12).

Fifth: Our Conclusion

It is the elders’s opinion that the textual evidence of 1 Timothy 3:12 and extra-textual evidence from other parts of Scripture means that the phrase, “*husband of one wife*” can be taken at face value. If a man is, at the time of consideration for the office of deacon, “*the husband of one wife*,” i.e., of a faithful character to his wife, a previous divorce may not disqualify him from serving as a deacon.

Thus, divorced candidates should be considered on a person-by-person basis. If a man divorced because of adultery, or abandonment, he may be qualified to serve a deacon.

Note: The elders would also like the church to consider men who were divorced before their conversion (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17). (Moses and Paul were both murderers before ‘eldering’ Israel/the church).

Sixth: Our Hope

Deacons comprise one of two offices in the church, i.e., deacons and elders. A church whose deacons who are biblically called and deployed is blessed in innumerable ways. Our hope is that, rightly interpreting this text, Heritage will best honor Christ, the office of deacon, the church body, and the world.

Seventh: The Concerns

1- Change is hard but we are a God-centered, scripturally based congregation and a faithful reading should be encouraged, despite our past interpretations, traditions, or experiences. This is an affirmation of *sola scriptura*.

2 – We do not consider this the first step in a slippery slope away from a conservative stance on Scripture. We think we are conserving what the Bible says.

3 - We believe the qualifications for deacons to be a second or tertiary issue and not a primary issue such as the deity of Christ, the resurrection or the second coming. For this reason, we hope that members who do not agree with our interpretation will remain at Heritage, regardless of the church's eventual affirmation or denial of this proposal.

4- Please take today through Wednesday to consider the Scripture, pray over this matter, discuss with family, mentors, etc., and return Wednesday night at 6:30pm for the opportunity to ask questions and further discuss the matter. We will livestream that gathering.

5- We are an elder-led congregation and so the congregation must affirm or disapprove of this change. What is led by the elders and approved by the members, we consider to be the Lord's will for our church body. (This will not require a by-law change but a change in our "policies and procedures" for selecting deacons).

After a month of reflection and prayer, on September 26th, the elders will ask the church to affirm or disapprove this proposal:

“Biblically qualified men who meet the ‘above reproach’ characteristics of 1 Timothy 3:8-12, may be single or married men, including those who have been widowed or biblically divorced.”