

Divorced Pastors

I take pen in hand today because I am spiritually distraught. Please let me begin by saying that I am not looking down my nose at anyone, I am not better than anyone else, I do not claim to be perfect (except in my Savior), and I understand that I make as many mistakes as anyone else. I write because I have been informed that another church, that claims to be an independent Baptist church, has chosen as their pastor a man who has been divorced and remarried. In this particular case, I believe his wife has been divorced and remarried as well. I hope the church understood the situation, and that they voted with open eyes, because if I understand the Scriptures correctly, they will be judged for their choice.

I am not against divorced people. Divorce has always been with us, and will always be with us as long as people still get married (and that institution itself is becoming scarcer, so divorce may not be a problem much longer). This does not take God by surprise. Those who have been divorced can serve God with all their might. There will be many divorced people who will place far ahead of me in the race for the Master's rewards. But I wish, for a few paragraphs, to address this particular qualification for church leadership.

This qualification is not the only qualification for primary church leadership, but it just happens to be the one I decided to harp on today. And since we are to preach all the counsel of God, it is fair game to preach about this singular qualification. God twice addresses the subject of this qualification as it pertains to the bishop (an overseer of the assembly, nowadays usually called a pastor).

I Timothy 3:2. "*A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;*" Titus 1:6 "*If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.*"

So here we have the qualification in question. It seems to me that the qualification clearly prohibits divorced men from seeking, or being considered for, a position of primary leadership. But obviously, not everyone sees it that way. So let's take a few minutes and dwell upon the

subject.

First, we must decide what dissolves a marriage. Certainly, death dissolves a marriage. If a spouse dies, the marriage is over. Scripture says as much in many different ways.

Romans 7:2 *"For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband."*

So we next must consider if any other process ends a marriage. We know that divorce was given in the Old Testament. We also know that it was given because of the hardness of hearts. We all know that a hard heart is exactly what should be required of pastors, so maybe there is something here that I am missing after all. But a divorce evidences a failure, a failure in life, in communication, in decency, and in morality.

Jesus said, when speaking of divorce: *"But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery."*(Matthew 5:32)

So before we speak of the exception, under which everyone seems to place him or herself, we should accept the fact that other than for the exception, divorce equals adultery if remarriage occurs. So that means that if a divorced man is in the pastorate, and he put his wife away for a cause other than fornication, he is an adulterer, or at the very least, the cause of it. Can that be considered "blameless," which is the first qualification for leadership? Didn't I hear somewhere that God gave a commandment against that?

Now as pertaining to fornication, does the Scripture REQUIRE that the husband put away his wife for that cause? No, it does not. So the husband is free to keep his wife, even though she be a fornicator, if he so desire. But those with any sense about them might wonder if someone could pastor a church if his wife was a known fornicator, might they not? Especially if he decided to keep her around as the pastor's wife. It seems, however, that those same people don't have a problem having someone in the pulpit who failed at his attempt at marriage, whose wife became a

fornicator, and he took care of it by doing the "scriptural" thing and divorcing his wife. I have heard the argument that fornication scripturally ends the marriage, but Scripture says no such thing. Divorce ends the marriage. Fornication may be a scriptural reason for divorce, but some marriages survive in spite of it. Restoration is still possible with God. That does not mean that a pastoral position will be waiting for the man with these problems, however, either way they turn out.

At this juncture, we should point out that, if fornication is part of a marriage, even if divorce takes place, there is no place for a pastor with those problems. The Jewish church realized that the Gentiles did not have to keep their law, but they still insisted that they abstain from fornication. *"But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood."* (Acts 15:20)

"Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." (I Corinthians 7:2)

"Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness," (Galatians 5:19)

"But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints;" (Ephesians 5:3)

"Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:" (Colossians 3:5)

The New Testament Greek Lexicon's definition of fornication is: 2. To give one's self to unlawful sexual intercourse a. to commit fornication. So if a pastoral candidate is involved, or was involved, in a relationship that included fornication, the early church had already spoken against it. No matter what steps were taken by the candidate to eradicate the problem, surely a pulpit would not be awaiting.

Another argument I hear is that, if the divorce occurred before salvation, it doesn't count. You will not find that argument supported in Scripture anywhere. And besides, the first argument was that fornication scripturally ends a marriage in the eyes of God. Is that really a concern for lost people? Do we really apply Scripture to a situation, and then say that the

situation doesn't apply because the individuals weren't subject to Scripture? Aren't lost people subject to God? Are we all just nuts? Or are we just using any method to justify doing what we want to do? By the way, I do not hear many quote that same passage of Scripture from the book of Mark: " *And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.*"(Mark 10:11-12)

Some people use the argument that fornication ends the marriage "in the eyes of God." I will not indulge that argument here, except to say that we are not concerned in qualifying a pastor with what is seen in the eyes of God, but with what is seen in the eyes of man. God might see many things that would disqualify us from the pastorate, because he looks upon the heart. Man looks on the outward appearance, and that is enough to compare him with the Scripture to see if he meets the stated qualifications for office. All the qualifications for the office of Bishop are ones that can be seen and known by man. If we had to exclude from pastoral candidacy anyone who had ever committed spiritual adultery, as defined by the Lord, we would have few churches.

"But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matthew 5:28)

Perhaps the most prominent argument I hear is that, when Paul wrote this, polygamy was rampant, and Paul was writing to prevent polygamists from becoming pastors. So what he meant was that a man could not be a pastor unless he had one wife AT A TIME. If the guy got married and divorced every day, then he could pastor to his heart's content since he would only have one wife at a time. In justifying ourselves in this manner, we advocate the position that adultery is more righteous than polygamy, since we have shown that divorce is equal to adultery (which is hunky-dory for the pastorate), but Paul did not want polygamists in the pastorate. If you can make some sense out of that argument you are a better theologian than I. God allowed polygamy, and one might even make an argument that he blessed it (remember David?), but when David committed adultery, he was sorely punished. So if God was concerned about keeping one of those

categories out of the pastorate, which do you think it would be? The fact is that by stating the qualification in this manner, it bars both practices from office.

I should like, in closing, to point out that the early church fathers all held the position that a divorced man could not hold the bishopric, and I should like to quote from a few worthy later sources.

John Gill: "this rule excludes all such persons from being elders, or pastor, or overseers of churches, that were polygamists; who had more wives than one at a time, or had divorced their wives, and not for adultery and had married others."

(Notice that Gill indicates that adulterers and polygamists are the same thing.)

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown: "Though the Jews practiced polygamy, yet as he is writing to a Gentile Church and as polygamy was never allowed among even laymen in the Church, the ancient interpretation that the prohibition here is against polygamy in a candidate bishop is not correct. It must, therefore, mean that, though laymen might lawfully marry again, candidates for the episcopate or presbytery were better to have been married only once. As in I Timothy 5:9 "wife of one man," implies a woman married but once; so "husband of one wife" here must mean the same. The feeling which prevailed among the Gentiles as well as the Jews (compare as to Anna, Luke 2:36,37), against a second marriage would, on the ground of expediency and conciliation in matters indifferent and not involving compromise of principle, account for Paul's prohibition here in the case of one in so prominent a sphere as a bishop or a deacon. Hence the stress that is laid in the context on the repute in which the candidate for orders is held among those over whom he is to preside (Titus 1:16).

The Council of Laodicea and the apostolic canons discountenanced second marriages, especially in the case of candidates for ordination."

Matthew Henry: "He must be the husband of one wife; not having given a bill of divorce to one, and then taken another, or not having many wives at once, as at that time was too common both among Jews and Gentiles, especially among Gentiles."

John Wesley: "The husband of one wife-This neither means that a bishop

must be married, nor that the man not marry a second wife; which it is just as lawful for him to do as to marry a first, and may in some case be his bounden duty. But whereas polygamy and divorce on slight occasions were common both among the Jews and heathens, it teaches us that ministers, of all others, ought to stand clear of those sins."

Darby: "the assemblies were more simple than people think, and the persons of whom they were composed had but recently come out from the most deplorable habits; and therefore a previous conduct that commanded the respect of others was necessary to give weight to the exercise of the office on superintendence. It was also needful that he who was invested with this charge would be able to convince gainsayers. For they would have to do with such, especially among the Jews, who where always and everywhere active in opposition to the truth, and subtle in perverting the mind."

It appears that, in today's enlightened churches, the only qualification for primary leadership is for someone (anyone) to stand up and proclaim, "I am called to preach, and my calling takes precedence over every other thing in my life, including the Word of God." After all, God would not have called someone if He didn't mean it, right?

In any other instance we, as Baptists, would demand that the Word of God be examined, and that we subjugate our will to the Divine Authority. We would say that the Word of God will determine the Will of God, and that all our actions, determinations, and motivations, be allowed inspections by that which is able to pierce even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

But for now, it appears that we will simply go our own way. After all, it's our leadership, right? We'll determine the qualifications, thank you.

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