“The Husband of One Wife”

An Exegetical and Biblical-Ethical Examination of Marital Fidelity in the Pastoral Epistles

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Abstract

This study examines the exegetical and biblical-ethical significance of the expressions **“the husband of one wife” (1 Tm 3:2, 12; Ti 1:6)** and **“the wife of one man” (1 Tm 5:9)**. It considers the Greek constructions, literary contexts, historical reception, and biblical doctrine of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It concludes that the disputed expressions principally characterize exclusive marital fidelity rather than impose an absolute restriction upon the number of marriages contracted throughout an individual’s lifetime. This interpretation neither sanctions indiscriminate divorce and remarriage nor establishes automatic eligibility for ecclesiastical office following marital dissolution.

Keywords: Pastoral Epistles, marital fidelity, divorce and remarriage, pastoral qualifications, biblical ethics, μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα.

Contents

I. Introduction 3
II. Lexical and Syntactical Examination 4
A. Construction and Interpretive Possibilities 4
B. The Qualitative Interpretation 6
III. The Marital Qualifications in Their Pastoral Contexts 8
A. Blamelessness and Domestic Government 8
B. The Parallel in Titus and Public Reputation 10
IV. The Reciprocal Widow Qualification in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 11
A. The Reciprocal Expression 11
B. Younger Widows and Remarriage 12
C. The Restrictive Alternative 13
D. Contextual Assessment 14
V. Historical Reception of the One-Spouse Qualification 14
A. Ancient One-Spouse Ideals 14
B. Early Christian Reception 15
C. Diversity and Later Clerical Restrictions 17
VI. The Biblical Doctrine of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage 18
A. Creation, Divorce, and the Teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ 18
B. Romans 7 and the Marriage Bond 21
C. First Corinthians 6–7 22
D. Ethical Implications 24
VII. Exegetical and Biblical-Ethical Synthesis 25
A. Interpretive Synthesis 25
B. Ecclesiastical Application 27
VIII. Conclusion 28
Bibliography 30

I. Introduction

Among the qualifications prescribed for ecclesiastical leadership in the Pastoral Epistles, few have occasioned more persistent disagreement than the biblical requirement that a bishop be **"the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2)**. The corresponding language governing deacons **(1 Tm 3:12)** and elders **(Ti 1:6)** presents substantially the same interpretive difficulty, while the description of an eligible widow as **"the wife of one man" (1 Tm 5:9)** introduces a reciprocal construction whose significance cannot be disregarded. Perhaps the language appears uncomplicated in English, yet its implications have divided interpreters over whether Paul intended to prohibit polygamy, require marital fidelity, exclude individuals who have contracted successive marriages, or establish some combination of these restrictions. The controversy becomes particularly consequential when the qualifications are invoked to disqualify a man from pastoral office solely because he has experienced divorce and remarriage, notwithstanding the circumstances attending the dissolution of his former marriage or his subsequent conduct.

The question is not exhausted by the observation that the Bible consistently commends marital fidelity. The disputed expressions contain a numerical element whose significance demands explanation. Nor can the controversy be resolved by assuming that every reference to one wife necessarily describes the number of marriages contracted[1] throughout an individual's lifetime. Such an interpretation must establish that Paul's language concerns successive marital relationships rather than the exclusivity and integrity of an existing union. The corresponding widow qualification further complicates the inquiry, since an interpretation advanced for male officeholders must be reconciled with the substantially parallel language employed concerning women. A defensible conclusion must emerge from the grammatical construction, literary context, historical setting, and broader biblical testimony instead of from an ecclesiastical convention imposed upon the passages in advance.

A formidable challenge to the marital-fidelity interpretation has recently been advanced by A. Andrew Das, whose examination of the one-spouse criterion situates the pastoral expressions within Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions commending marriage to a single spouse. Das contends that the historical evidence renders a lifetime numerical interpretation more plausible than many contemporary commentators have acknowledged.[2] He further maintains that the corresponding widow qualification and the broader New Testament treatment of remarriage strengthen the restrictive reading.[3] His argument deserves particular attention because it does not rest exclusively upon the English wording or upon an assumed prohibition against divorce. Instead, it brings

[1] Interestingly, under civil law and jurisprudence, marriage is regarded as a contract. *See* Okla. Stat. tit. 43, § 1; *Galbraith v. Galbraith*, 2024 OK 43, ¶ 11, 550 P.3d 942.

[2] A. Andrew Das, "The One-Spouse Criterion in the Pastorals (1 Tim 3.2, 12; 5.9; Titus 1.6)," *New Testament Studies* 71 (2025): 380–94.

[3] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 380–93.

together linguistic, historical, and canonical considerations that must be answered on their own terms.

The present study contends that the expressions **"the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2, 12; Ti 1:6)** and **"the wife of one man" (1 Tm 5:9)**, interpreted according to their grammatical construction, literary contexts, historical setting, and the broader biblical teaching concerning marriage and remarriage, principally describe exclusive marital fidelity instead of imposing an absolute restriction upon the number of marriages contracted throughout an individual's lifetime. This conclusion does not presume that every divorce or subsequent marriage is morally legitimate, nor does it suggest that marital fidelity exhausts the qualifications for ecclesiastical office. It maintains, instead, that the numerical fact of a previous marriage does not independently establish a violation of the particular requirement under examination.

II. Lexical and Syntactical Examination

A. Construction and Interpretive Possibilities

An examination of the marital requirements must begin with the language in which Paul expressed them, although the presence of an isolated Greek construction cannot impart to an interpretation a certainty unwarranted by its syntax. In 1 Timothy 3:2, the bishop is required to be μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα, while Titus 1:6 employs the corresponding nominative construction, μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνήρ. The qualification governing deacons in 1 Timothy 3:12 appears in the plural, μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρες. In each instance, the genitive phrase μιᾶς γυναικός precedes the substantive denoting a man or husband.[4] The reciprocal construction in 1 Timothy 5:9, ἑνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή, employs the same numerical relationship with the genders reversed. The Authorized Version renders these constructions **"the husband of one wife," "the husbands of one wife,"** and **"the wife of one man,"** respectively. The essential exegetical question concerns the nature of the qualification conveyed by the numerical modifier and its relationship to the marital designation.

Charles J. Ellicott invokes precisely this grammatical objection when he dismisses Bretschneider's inference that a bishop must be married, citing Georg Benedikt Winer in the edition available to him. Ellicott's citation must not be converted into an endorsement of the present study's view of remarriage.[5] Its actual value is narrower and clearer, viz., neither the presence of the marital expression nor the force of the numeral justifies imposing marriage as an absolute prerequisite for pastoral office. The issue of successive marriages must be adjudicated separately.

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[4] Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 291.

[5] Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, with a Revised Translation* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1856), 40, citing Winer, § 17.4, 126 n. (edition cited by Ellicott).

Winer's grammatical discussion supplies a salutary corrective to a different interpretation. He rejects the suggestion, attributed to Bretschneider, that the one-wife stipulation simply means an overseer must be married.[6] The numeral cannot be reduced to an indefinite article, for the distinction between having *a* wife and having *one* wife remains pronounced when more than one marital relationship is possible, whether concurrent or successive. This is a genuine limitation upon a purely qualitative explanation because the language contains a numerical element for which an account must be given. It does not settle the further question whether Paul legislates a lifetime count of marriages or requires an exclusive and honorable marital relationship when the candidate is considered for office.

The cardinal numeral εἷς, appearing here in its appropriate inflected forms, ordinarily signifies **"one."**[7] Its numerical force cannot be eradicated simply because the construction appears in a catalog of moral and ethical qualifications. It should be remembered that the nouns ἀνήρ and γυνή possess a semantic range that includes both the general designations man and woman and the relational designations husband and wife. The determination of the appropriate connotation is contextual.[8] Since the passages concern marital relationships, the Authorized Version's rendering is entirely intelligible. The combination of these terms does not settle whether the numeral concerns spouses possessed simultaneously, marital unions contracted successively, or the exclusive character of the individual's marital conduct. That resolution turns on an examination of the construction as a whole.

This distinction is fundamental to the present inquiry. Grammatical quality and numerical reference are not mutually exclusive propositions.[9] A man might be classified by exclusive fidelity to his wife, while another interpretation could characterize him by the absence of a second marriage. Both readings preserve the numerical element. Their relative merits must be judged by the usage of the expressions, their placement among the surrounding qualifications, and the relationship between the pastoral and widow passages.

A prohibition against polygamy accords with the singular numerical expression, but the reciprocal widow requirement presents an immediate difficulty. Since polyandry was not an ordinarily recognized marital arrangement within the relevant historical setting, an interpretation restricting the male qualification to simultaneous polygamy neglects a needful reckoning with the corresponding female expression. Craig S. Keener questions whether polygamy could have

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[6] Georg Benedikt Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, 7th ed., enlarged by Gottlieb Lünemann, rev. and authorized trans. Warren F. Draper (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1869), 117–18 (§ 18.9).

[7] Ethelbert Stauffer, "εἷς," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:434.

[8] Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., based on Walter Bauer's lexicon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 79–80 (s.v. "ἀνήρ"), 208–9 (s.v. "γυνή").

[9] H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 137–38, especially 138.

constituted the principal concern in the churches addressed by the Pastoral Epistles. His examination recognizes that illicit sexual relationships, including concubinage, furnish a broader context for understanding marital exclusivity.[10] The prohibition of polygamy may indeed be included within the moral ambit of the qualification without exhausting the qualification's significance.[11]

The one-wife-for-one-life interpretation possesses greater linguistic and historical plausibility than the polygamy-only explanation. Das argues that the emphasis upon one spouse should be understood against the ideals in antiquity commending marriage to a single partner. He challenges the contention that such ideals were restricted to women and adduces evidence that corresponding expectations could be expressed concerning men.[12] Das further observes that Greek offered other means of describing marital faithfulness, thereby questioning whether the pastoral expressions should be reduced to a general admonition against sexual misconduct.[13] His objection exposes a weakness in interpretations that simply substitute faithful husband for Paul's actual language without accounting for the numerical element.[14]

B. The Qualitative Interpretation

The marital-fidelity interpretation receives support from the descriptive character of the construction and from its placement within qualifications principally concerned with observable conduct. The expression identifies the kind of man who may properly exercise ecclesiastical responsibility.[15] Its natural ethical force may be understood as requiring exclusive devotion to the wife with whom he is joined, thereby excluding adultery, concubinage, and other conduct incompatible with marital fidelity.

Patrick Fairbairn's argument turns on the prominence of the stipulation in Paul's lists. The apostle places it immediately after blamelessness, without offering an explanation that he has now forbidden a marriage which earlier Scripture explicitly permits following bereavement.[16] Fairbairn further reasons that the imposition of such a restriction, extending even to deacons, would effect a pronounced departure from the received moral order. The strength of his argument lies in the burden it places upon those who infer a novel ecclesiastical disability from a brief locution. Its limitation is equally apparent. The argument from lawful remarriage after death does not

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[10] Craig S. Keener, "Husband of One Wife," *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 109, no. 1 (January 1997): 5–24.

[11] Keener, "Husband of One Wife," 6–8.

[12] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 382–84.

[13] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 381.

[14] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 380–83.

[15] Sydney Page, "Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 114–16.

[16] Patrick Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles: Their Greek Text and Translation, with Introduction, Expository Notes, and Dissertations* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 417–18; compare Robert L. Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (July 1974): 229–30.

independently establish the legitimacy of remarriage after divorce, which must be demonstrated on other biblical grounds.

In an extended appendix devoted to the expression, Fairbairn construes the requirement as obligating an officeholder to stand in a marital relation to only one living woman. His argument is not simply that fidelity is admirable, nor does he defend every marriage following divorce.[17] Rather, he maintains that a previous union dissolved by death cannot, without a clearer biblical prohibition, disqualify a man from ecclesiastical office. Fairbairn is a forceful opponent of an absolute prohibition of remarriage after widowhood, while his own positive construction concentrates upon concurrent marital relations. His position is thus allied to, but not identical with, the broader fidelity interpretation defended in this study.

Sydney Page predicates his affirmative argument upon the structure of the qualification lists, each of which begins with a general requirement of exemplary reputation before identifying more narrowly tailored traits ordinarily discernible in the candidate's conduct.[18] He reasons that fidelity to one's wife fits this pattern better than an absolute prohibition derived solely from an earlier marital event.[19] Ed Glasscock likewise defends the description of a faithful **"one-woman man."**[20] William D. Mounce also favors marital fidelity, preserving the force of the numeral while interpreting the reciprocal widow qualification consistently with the requirements for bishops and deacons.[21] These interpreters offer a substantive affirmative argument for the qualitative interpretation, instead of an inference drawn only from the difficulties attending the opposing view.

The question cannot be settled by treating the numerical adjective as though it independently dictated a lifetime prohibition. Robert L. Saucy begins his examination by observing that the words themselves do not decide whether the requirement means one wife at a time or one wife during a lifetime.[22] Page similarly distinguishes a description of marital status from a description of the quality of a marital relationship, and he argues that the parallel qualification concerning widows must function as a control upon either reading.[23] These arguments do not negate the numerical weight emphasized by Das,[24] but establish the necessity of construing the expression within its literary and ethical setting.

Peter S. Ruckman's treatment of the wording approaches the question from the standpoint of the man's actual marital relationship. On that reading, a bishop who is faithfully joined to one

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[17] Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles*, 416–18, appendix B.

[18] Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–16; Ed Glasscock, "The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, no. 559 (July–September 1983): 249–52.

[19] Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–16; Glasscock, "Husband of One Wife Requirement," 249–53.

[20] Glasscock, "Husband of One Wife Requirement," 244–58.

[21] William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), EPUB edition, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:2 and 5:9.

[22] Saucy, "Husband of One Wife," 229.

[23] Page, "Marital Expectations," 105–20.

[24] Saucy, "Husband of One Wife," 229–30; Page, "Marital Expectations," 105–7.

wife does not become a husband of two wives simply because an earlier marriage has ended.[25] The opposing numerical interpretation instead treats a previous marital union as an enduring impediment to office, even where the former relationship was dissolved and the subsequent marriage is lawful. These positions must be distinguished before the moral implications of either are assessed.

One aspect of Ruckman's argument requires qualification. His contention that a lifetime numerical interpretation would effectively permit sexual immorality so long as no additional marriage ceremony occurred does not follow.[26] The remaining qualifications, together with the broader biblical prohibitions against fornication and adultery, would continue to condemn such misconduct. A restrictive interpreter need not regard the marital expression as the sole ethical standard governing sexual conduct. The stronger argument for Ruckman's conclusion rests not upon the supposed moral consequences of the opposing interpretation, but upon the positive evidence that the disputed language characterizes marital fidelity.

The relevant distinction is thus not between a present condition wholly divorced from the past and a lifetime qualification attentive to previous conduct. It is between a moral assessment informed by the individual's history and an absolute numerical disqualification arising from the existence of a former marriage.[27] The former is consonant with the nature of the surrounding qualifications. The latter requires additional textual demonstration.[28]

The present study proceeds upon the provisional judgment that the marital-fidelity interpretation best accommodates the descriptive purport of the expressions without imposing a lifetime prohibition not articulated in the biblical language. That judgment remains subject to the examination of the immediate pastoral passages, the widow qualification, and the biblical teaching concerning the dissolution of marriage. The grammatical evidence establishes the boundaries of the controversy. Its resolution must arise from the cumulative testimony of the text.

III. The Marital Qualifications in Their Pastoral Contexts

A. Blamelessness and Domestic Government

The construal of **"the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2)** must be governed not only by its grammatical construction but also by the character of the surrounding biblical requirements. Paul introduces the office of a bishop as **"a good work" (1 Tm 3:1)** and immediately establishes the

[25] Peter S. Ruckman, *Pastoral Epistles: I & II Timothy, Titus* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1989; reprint, 2019), 66–71.

[26] Ruckman, *Pastoral Epistles*, 68.

[27] Compare Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–16; Glasscock, "Husband of One Wife Requirement," 249–52, 254–56.

[28] Ruckman, *Pastoral Epistles*, 67–68.

overarching requirement that the bishop **"must be blameless" (1 Tm 3:2)**.[29] The ensuing requirements constitute neither an indiscriminate assortment of ecclesiastical regulations nor a compendium of prescriptions divorced from the moral responsibilities attendant upon the office. Paul delineates the character and conduct befitting a man entrusted with the oversight of the church of God. The marital requisite forms part of a broader ethical portrait whose constituent features must be construed in light of their collective purpose.

Gordon D. Fee's exposition of the disputed requirement invites particular scrutiny. He canvasses the principal interpretations, including compulsory marriage, the prohibition of polygamy, the proscription of successive marriages, and marital fidelity, ultimately favoring a construal emphasizing exemplary faithfulness.[30] His exposition further acknowledges the relationship between the candidate's marital conduct and the broader domestic responsibilities delineated by Paul.[31] Even so, Fee's position must not be represented as an unqualified endorsement of the eligibility of every divorced and remarried man.[32] Page specifically observes that Fee's formulation also excludes divorce and remarriage, a consequential distinction requiring the present study to differentiate agreement concerning the ethical character of the biblical wording from agreement concerning its various applications.[33]

The domestic dimension of Paul's instruction becomes especially conspicuous in his prescription that the bishop be **"one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity" (1 Tm 3:4)**. Paul immediately articulates the underlying rationale: **"For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (1 Tm 3:5)**.[34] The biblical reasoning proceeds from the candidate's demonstrated stewardship of his household to the ecclesiastical responsibilities he may subsequently be called upon to discharge. His domestic relationships afford tangible evidence of his fitness to exercise spiritual oversight.

The ethical significance of this distinction receives further elucidation from Scott B. Rae's treatment of marriage as an institution grounded in the creation ordinance. Rae regards permanence and monogamy as normative features of the marital union, while acknowledging that biblical legislation accommodates circumstances arising from departures from the original divine ordinance.[35] When applied to the pastoral qualifications, this framework obliges the interpreter to

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[29] George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), EPUB edition, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:1–7.

[30] Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), EPUB edition, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:2; Page, "Marital Expectations," 114 n. 29.

[31] Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:2.

[32] Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–16.

[33] Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–16.

[34] Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:4–5.

[35] Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2026), 340–42.

discern between the moral ideal attendant upon marriage and the ethical assessment of an individual candidate's marital history. The former prescribes the moral standard by which individual conduct must be judged. The latter necessitates an inquiry into whether the conduct under consideration constitutes a violation of that standard.

The recurrence of the marital formulation among the requirements for deacons possesses substantial exegetical significance. Paul dictates that **"the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well" (1 Tm 3:12)**. The correspondence with the requirements prescribed for bishops is manifest.[36] Both offices demand domestic integrity, prudent household administration, and a character commensurate with the responsibilities entrusted to their occupants.

B. The Parallel in Titus and Public Reputation

The instructions addressed to Titus provide additional contextual testimony. Paul charges him to **"ordain elders in every city" (Ti 1:5)** and identifies the eligible candidate as **"blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly" (Ti 1:6)**.[37] The close correspondence with 1 Timothy 3 demonstrates that the marital requisite belongs to a coherent biblical conception of church leadership.

Philip H. Towner advances a related but distinguishable contextual argument. He evaluates the marital requisite in relation to the candidate's public reputation and the expectation that church leaders exemplify honorable conduct.[38] He considers interpretations mandating marriage, prohibiting polygamy exclusively, or disqualifying every successive marriage less persuasive than one emphasizing fidelity within a monogamous union.[39] His attention to the standards of conduct recognized by the Christian community is especially pertinent to the present inquiry. Even where a subsequent marriage is lawful, the candidate's reputation and the circumstances attending his former union remain relevant to the independent requirement of blamelessness.

George W. Knight III observes that the attributes in 1 Timothy and Titus exhibit substantially comparable patterns, notwithstanding differences in their arrangement. In Titus, the placement of marriage and family at the beginning of the requirements accentuates the relationship between domestic responsibility and church oversight.[40] This arrangement lends support to an interpretation emphasizing the candidate's conduct within his household, although it does not foreclose the possibility that Paul also intended to restrict successive marriages.[41]

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[36] Rae, *Moral Choices*, 342.

[37] Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), EPUB edition, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

[38] Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), EPUB edition, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:2.

[39] Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, discussion of 1 Timothy 3:2.

[40] Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:1–7.

[41] Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, commentary on 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9.

The ethical interpretation must also account for Paul's insistence that the bishop **"must have a good report of them which are without" (1 Tm 3:7)**. This requirement precludes reducing marital fidelity to the candidate's subjective appraisal of his own conduct. Fitness for church leadership demands a credible reputation extending beyond the congregation to the surrounding community.

The three pastoral passages disclose a coherent biblical standard. In each, the marital requisite appears among prescriptions pertaining to personal character, domestic responsibility, and the integrity of church leadership. Its application to bishops, deacons, and elders reinforces the unity of these ethical expectations, while its association with blamelessness favors an interpretation emphasizing marital fidelity.

IV. The Reciprocal Widow Qualification in 1 Timothy 5:3–16

A. The Reciprocal Expression

The reciprocal formulation in 1 Timothy 5:9 provides perhaps the most consequential internal evidence for ascertaining the meaning of the marital criteria prescribed for church officeholders. Whereas the bishop must be **"the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2)**, the widow eligible for enrollment must have been **"the wife of one man" (1 Tm 5:9)**.[42] The parallelism is sufficiently pronounced to demand an interpretation accounting for both constructions. Any exposition treating the former as a description of marital fidelity while neglecting the latter leaves a substantial portion of the relevant Pauline evidence unexplained.

The significance of the widow requirement is not diminished by the fact that Winer's direct objection concerns the overseer passages. William D. Mounce maintains that the corresponding description of the widow must be interpreted consistently with the marital language applied to church officers. The surrounding context emphasizes her demonstrated history of good works, hospitality, and benevolence.[43] An interpretation reducing her eligibility to a purely arithmetical count of marriages must account for Paul's explicit encouragement that younger widows marry. Conversely, an interpretation emphasizing fidelity must recognize the retrospective character of the expression and cannot rest exclusively upon the accompanying descriptions of virtuous conduct.

Page regards the widow requirement not as an incidental parallel but as an essential test of the proposed interpretation. If the expression describing an overseer concerns the quality of his marital fidelity, its reciprocal formulation may describe a widow whose conduct toward her husband manifested comparable faithfulness.[44] The accompanying attributes in 1 Timothy 5:10 emphasize a woman's established reputation for good works, hospitality, and benevolence. Their placement lends substantial contextual support to the qualitative interpretation, although Das's

[42] Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, 138.

[43] Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, commentary on 1 Timothy 5:9, 14.

[44] Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–16.

evidence concerning ancient numerical one-spouse ideals militates against treating the parallel as conclusive proof.[45]

Paul introduces the subject with the injunction **"Honour widows that are widows indeed" (1 Tm 5:3)**. He subsequently distinguishes women possessing children or other relatives capable of providing assistance from those who lack such support. The obligation of familial provision receives particular emphasis, culminating in the solemn declaration that one who neglects his household **"hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tm 5:8)**.

The passage juxtaposes an objective age threshold with evidence of established moral character. While a widow must have attained sixty years of age, she must also possess a reputation for hospitality, benevolence, and practical godliness.[46] Significantly, the marital requisite occupies an intermediate position between the numerical age restriction and the ensuing enumeration of virtuous conduct.

The full qualification is instructive, as Paul writes, **"Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work" (1 Tm 5:9–10)**. Paul deliberately combines a measurable age requirement with a retrospective assessment of the widow's conduct. The interpretive question is whether the intervening marital wording establishes an additional numerical restriction or belongs to the accompanying description of her established character.

B. Younger Widows and Remarriage

The apparent tension emerges when Paul turns from the enrollment of older widows to the circumstances of younger women. He instructs Timothy to refuse the younger widows **(1 Tm 5:11)**, identifying conduct that renders their enrollment inappropriate. His concerns encompass the abandonment of an earlier commitment, idleness, indiscreet speech, and behavior occasioning reproach. The discussion culminates in the affirmative instruction that **"I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (1 Tm 5:14)**.

The relationship between verses 9 and 14 demands careful distinction. If the younger women addressed in verse 14 are widows whose husbands have died, Paul's instruction necessarily contemplates their remarriage.[47] The moral legitimacy of that remarriage does not independently establish their subsequent eligibility for enrollment upon attaining sixty years of age. Paul may sanction remarriage among younger widows while restricting enrollment to women satisfying additional requirements. These differing canons need not be regarded as contradictory.

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[45] Page, "Marital Expectations," 106, 116–18; Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 382–93.

[46] Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, commentary on 1 Timothy 5:3–16.

[47] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 391–93.

C. The Restrictive Alternative

Das presents a substantial challenge to the foregoing interpretation. He situates the pastoral phrasings within ancient one-spouse traditions, particularly the Roman ideal of the *univira*, a woman whose marital history was confined to one husband.[48] In opposition to readings emphasizing marital fidelity, Das contends that these traditions embodied a recognizable numerical ideal. He further argues that comparable expectations extended to men, strengthening the historical evidence for applying this interpretation to the qualifications governing male officeholders.[49]

Das also endeavors to reconcile the apparent tension between the older widow's one-husband qualification and Paul's instruction that younger women marry. He proposes that the "younger women" of verse 14 need not be identified with previously married younger widows.[50] His argument entertains the possibility that certain women, although never married, were designated as widows within a distinctive religious or social category. Under this "virgin-widow" hypothesis, the instruction to marry would not necessarily sanction remarriage following a husband's death. Das thus seeks to preserve a lifetime numerical interpretation of verse 9 while accounting for the directive in verse 14.

This hypothesis warrants consideration because it identifies a bona fide lexical distinction. The omission of the noun χήρα from verse 14 cannot be summarily dismissed.[51] That difference does not establish a change in the persons addressed. The surrounding discussion concerns widows, and the instruction in verse 14 follows directly upon the admonitions concerning younger widows in verses 11–13. A more abbreviated designation may naturally identify the same class of women without reiterating the earlier terminology.

This hypothesis encounters a formidable contextual difficulty. Verse 11 has already introduced **"the younger widows,"** and verses 12–13 continue to address their conduct. Verse 14 follows without any indication that Paul has turned to a different class of women. The historical possibility of a distinct category of women cannot supersede the contextual continuity of Paul's instructions without sufficient evidence that he has introduced a different class of people. At the same time, the argument for marital fidelity must not presume that Paul's approval of remarriage ipso facto establishes eligibility for enrollment among the widows. Such enrollment comprises a separate ecclesiastical determination.

Das advances a second explanation independent of the virgin-widow hypothesis. He maintains that the principal purpose of 1 Timothy 5:3–16 is to distinguish women genuinely dependent upon congregational assistance from those possessing alternative means of support.[52]

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[48] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 382, 384–86.

[49] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 382–83.

[50] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 391–92.

[51] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 392.

[52] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 393.

Under this interpretation, a woman who has entered successive marriages might possess additional familial connections or financial resources unavailable to a widow whose sole marriage has ended.[53] The one-husband requirement could accordingly serve as an indicator of greater economic vulnerability.

Paul addresses these economic considerations directly through his instructions concerning familial responsibility and the identification of widows indeed. The passage does not identify the one-husband requirement as a surrogate measure of alternative financial support. Although Das's reconstruction possesses historical plausibility under certain circumstances, the evidence for treating it as a universally applicable criterion remains insufficient.

D. Contextual Assessment

The historical evidence underlying Das's argument must not be underestimated. Greco-Roman commemorative inscriptions sometimes extolled women whose marital histories were confined to a single husband, while comparable ideals found expression in certain Jewish settings.[54] These traditions provide an identifiable cultural background against which the marital phrasings of the Pastoral Epistles may have been understood.

The widow passage demonstrates why the moral legitimacy of remarriage must be distinguished from eligibility for a particular ecclesiastical classification. Paul may sanction remarriage without thereby requiring that every remarried widow subsequently qualify for enrollment. Conversely, the existence of a specialized enrollment requirement does not establish the sinfulness of remarriage.

The widow provision furnishes substantial, though not decisive, support for understanding the pastoral marital formulations as descriptions of exclusive fidelity. Its grammatical correspondence with the criteria governing bishops, deacons, and elders is unmistakable, while its placement among retrospective moral standards favors an interpretation concerned with the character of the woman's marital conduct.

V. Historical Reception of the One-Spouse Qualification

A. Ancient One-Spouse Ideals

The historical reception of **"the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2)** and its corresponding expressions affords valuable testimony concerning the manner in which Christians understood the biblical requirements. Such evidence warrants particular attention when an interpretation acquired sufficient influence to shape ecclesiastical discipline across successive centuries. The distinction between the original meaning of a biblical instruction and its subsequent reception must remain intact. An interpretation may possess considerable antiquity without enjoying exclusive exegetical

[53] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 393.

[54] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 384–87.

authority, just as a later interpretation cannot be rejected solely because its historical attestation is less extensive.

Fairbairn provides an extended account of the historical reception of the disputed expression. He invokes Chrysostom, Theodoret, Theophylact, and Jerome as witnesses to interpretations that did not invariably disqualify a man who remarried following his wife's death. He traces the emergence of more restrictive prohibitions against second marriages in conjunction with ascetic tendencies, particularly those associated with Montanism and Tertullian.[55] His historical reconstruction must be weighed against the more recent evidence assembled by Das and David G. Hunter rather than accepted as an exhaustive account without qualification. Fairbairn's examination elucidates that an absolute prohibition against successive marriages was neither the exclusive ancient interpretation nor an undisputed consequence of the Greek expression.[56]

Das contends that the marital expressions in the Pastoral Epistles must be understood against the background of ancient one-spouse ideals. His argument challenges the assumption that such language principally commended fidelity within an existing marriage without reference to the number of unions contracted.[57] The aforementioned *univira* supplies a prominent example. Das adduces funerary inscriptions, literary testimony, and religious customs that celebrated fidelity to a single spouse, sometimes extending the ideal beyond the spouse's death.[58]

Das extends his investigation beyond Roman inscriptions. He identifies Jewish funerary evidence employing the Greek designation μόνανδρος, associated with women whose marital histories were confined to a single husband, and examines its relationship to the reciprocal qualification in 1 Timothy 5:9.[59] He further considers Jewish sectarian materials reflecting opposition to successive marriages under certain circumstances.

The Qumran materials discussed by Das are especially instructive because their interpretation is contested. The prohibition against taking two wives during a specified lifetime may refer to simultaneous polygamy, successive marriages during the first spouse's life, or a more comprehensive restriction.[60] Das argues that remarriage is a significant concern in these materials, and his conclusion warrants consideration. The disputed scope of the expressions cautions against treating them as unambiguous equivalents of the pastoral qualifications.

B. Early Christian Reception

The earliest Christian reception discloses a progressively heightened concern with remarriage, although the severity of the restrictions varied considerably. David G. Hunter observes

[55] Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles*, 418–22.
[56] Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles*, 418–22; Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 380–94.
[57] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 380–84, 393–94.
[58] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 382–86.
[59] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 387.
[60] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 388–90.

that certain second-century Christian writers retained reservations concerning successive marriages even after the death of a former spouse.[61] Their objections frequently arose from an aspiration toward greater continence instead of from a conviction that every subsequent marriage was intrinsically invalid.[62]

The historical tendency to commend celibacy or continued widowhood may have influenced the interpretation of the marital qualifications. Conversely, an understanding of those requirements as prohibiting successive marriages may have contributed to the broader exaltation of continence. The direction of this influence cannot always be ascertained with certainty. The historical evidence does establish that the reception of the pastoral expressions became intertwined with developing judgments concerning the comparative spiritual value of marriage and abstinence.

Hunter identifies the early third century as a particularly important period in the development of restrictions against ordaining men who had married more than once. The surviving evidence does not permit a definitive determination of when such restrictions first attained general acceptance.[63] Hunter further cautions that certain early testimonies emerged from ecclesiastical controversies in which the participants possessed compelling incentives to characterize opposing practices unfavorably.

Tertullian illustrates the manner in which the one-spouse language acquired an increasingly restrictive ecclesiastical application. In his treatment of successive marriages, he associated the qualifications of Christian ministers with the ideal of entering matrimony only once, invoking the priestly regulations of the Mosaic law as additional justification.[64] Most problematically, his reasoning extended beyond the immediate context of Paul's requirements for bishops and deacons by evaluating their marital status through a developing conception of clerical priesthood.

Hunter observes that Tertullian attributed to Leviticus a prohibition against a priest's second marriage that the relevant legislation does not state in that form. Leviticus 21 establishes restrictions concerning the women whom priests, particularly the high priest, were permitted to marry.[65] These provisions do not establish the universal prohibition against successive marriages upon which Tertullian's particular appeal depends. This distinction matters because an ancient interpretation of Paul may call for serious consideration without necessitating acceptance of every subsidiary biblical argument advanced in its defense.

This discrepancy does not establish that Tertullian's interpretation of the Pastoral Epistles was necessarily erroneous. It does demonstrate that one influential defense of the restrictive practice incorporated an additional biblical premise that cannot be sustained in the form asserted.

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[61] David G. Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!' Patristic Interpretations of 1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12, and Titus 1:6 and the Making of Christian Priesthood," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 32, no. 2 (2015): 336.

[62] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 336.

[63] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 336–37.

[64] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 337–40.

[65] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 339–40.

C. Diversity and Later Clerical Restrictions

The restrictive interpretation did not command universal acceptance among the Greek Fathers. Hunter identifies Theodore of Mopsuestia as a prominent representative of the marital-fidelity interpretation.[66] Theodore understood the biblical requirement as describing a man whose conduct within marriage was characterized by chastity and fidelity to his wife. He explicitly rejected the proposition that Paul intended to disqualify every man who had contracted a second marriage.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus provides a related, though distinguishable, historical witness. He interpreted the pastoral language as excluding polygamy and unchaste conduct without imposing an absolute disqualification upon men who had entered successive marriages.[67] The testimony of neither Theodore nor Theodoret establishes that this interpretation was the earliest or predominant understanding of the biblical requirement. Their historical significance resides in demonstrating that the marital-fidelity interpretation was represented within the ancient exegetical tradition rather than arising exclusively from modern controversies concerning divorce.

The historical evidence also encompasses interpreters who favored a restrictive construction. Contrary to Fairbairn's assessment, Hunter construes Chrysostom's exposition as prohibiting successive marriages, whereas Jerome entertained multiple interpretations of the expression.[68] Origen's treatment contributed to the emergence of more symbolic conceptions of ministerial marriage. Such differences caution against representing the patristic record as though the ancient church maintained an undifferentiated interpretive consensus. Its testimony establishes the antiquity and exegetical seriousness of the numerical interpretation without independently resolving the controversy.

Hunter's principal historical contribution consists in tracing the progressive association between the restrictive interpretation and developing conceptions of Christian ministry. An interpretation initially concerned with the pastoral marital requirement subsequently acquired the force of ecclesiastical discipline, receiving further justification through an increasingly sacerdotal understanding of ministerial office.[69]

The historical evidence establishes that the lifetime-once-married interpretation possesses considerable antiquity and cannot legitimately be dismissed as an artificial construction or a linguistic impossibility. Das's investigation demonstrates that one-spouse ideals were recognizable in the ancient Mediterranean world, with certain expressions of those ideals extending beyond fidelity within an existing marriage. Hunter's study further documents the increasing influence of restrictions upon remarried clergy within early Christianity.

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[66] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 334.

[67] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 334.

[68] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 334–35, 341–43.

[69] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 335, 337–40, 343–51.

The cumulative historical evidence discloses a contest between competing interpretations instead of an incontrovertible exegetical verdict. The restrictive interpretation enjoys meaningful cultural and patristic attestation, while the qualitative interpretation remains grammatically defensible, contextually coherent, and historically substantiated.

VI. The Biblical Doctrine of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

A. Creation, Divorce, and the Teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ

An examination of the marital qualifications cannot be detached from the biblical institution of marriage itself. Before determining whether a subsequent marriage constitutes an impediment to ecclesiastical office, the interpreter must ascertain the circumstances under which a preceding marital union may be dissolved and whether a succeeding marriage possesses biblical legitimacy. Fundamental to this inquiry is the distinction between the divinely ordained permanence of marriage and the asserted absolute indissolubility of every marital union.

Of special importance is Charles C. Ryrie's explicit criticism of the betrothal interpretation. While concurrently acknowledging the binding character of Jewish betrothal and the historical possibility that misconduct during this period might occasion its formal dissolution,[70] Ryrie notes that πορνεία is not otherwise attested in the narrowly circumscribed sense of unchastity occurring exclusively during betrothal.[71] His objection does not independently establish that the exception clause permits remarriage, given the fact that Ryrie himself favors an interpretation involving an unlawful union. It does demonstrate that the betrothal-only construction requires lexical substantiation beyond the historical existence of the betrothal institution. A historically conceivable application must not be mistaken for the exclusive meaning of the term.

The semantic range of πορνεία in Matthew's exception clause demands caution. Ryrie examines evangelical interpretations assigning the term a broader signification than adultery alone, citing John MacArthur's description of its application to unlawful sexual activity. Ryrie rejects the conclusion that this broader meaning governs Matthew 19:9, but he acknowledges that πορνεία may encompass adultery.[72] The distinction between a word's semantic range and its contextual application must be maintained.[73] The separate enumeration of πορνεία and μοιχεία in Matthew 15:19 does not establish their mutual semantic exclusivity, since a comprehensive designation may encompass conduct identified more specifically by another term.

The creation ordinance finds expression in the declaration, **"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gn 2:24)**. This pronouncement establishes the unity and permanence inherent in the divine institution

[70] Charles C. Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," *Grace Theological Journal* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 187–88.

[71] Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," 188.

[72] Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," 185–86.

[73] Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," 185–86.

of marriage. It neither sanctions divorce as an exercise of personal preference nor furnishes, apart from subsequent revelation, an exhaustive account of the circumstances under which a marital union may be dissolved. The interpreter must distinguish the original divine ordinance from the legislative provisions and biblical instructions addressing the consequences of human sin.

The Mosaic legislation concerning divorce provides an essential foundation for this inquiry. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 describes a man who dismisses his wife by furnishing a written bill of divorcement, whereupon she becomes the wife of another man.[74] Should the subsequent marriage terminate, whether by divorce or the second husband's death, the former husband is expressly prohibited from taking her again as his wife.

Deuteronomy does not command a husband to divorce his wife. The immediate legal prohibition concerns his resumption of the former marital relationship after the woman has become another man's wife and that subsequent union has terminated. Nevertheless, the legislation palpably recognizes both the second husband and the intervening marriage. Such recognition does not constitute moral approval of every circumstance occasioning the original divorce, but it precludes treating every subsequent marriage as a legal nullity without further biblical justification. This distinction assumes particular significance when Romans 7 is invoked to contend that a divorced individual cannot lawfully enter another marriage under any circumstances.

The Lord Jesus Christ restores the creation ordinance to the forefront of the controversy concerning divorce. When the Pharisees inquire whether a man may put away his wife **"for every cause" (Mt 19:3)**, Christ directs their attention to the original creation of male and female and the institution of their one-flesh union.[75] His conclusion is unequivocal. **"What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt 19:6)**.

The decisive declaration appears in Matthew 19:9, wherein the Lord states, **"And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."** The exception occurs within a construction that explicitly connects putting away one's wife with marrying another. Its grammatical scope and attendant moral implications demand careful examination instead of interpretive presumption. Since the Pharisees had inquired whether a man might put away his wife **"for every cause" (Mt 19:3)** (thus invoking Dt 24), Christ's response repudiates an indiscriminate license to put away one's spouse while reaffirming the authority of the creation account.

Matthew 5:32 furnishes a corresponding admonition, wherein the Lord declares, **"whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit**

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[74] Peter S. Ruckman, *The Book of Romans* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 2003; reprint, 2016), 254; Ruckman, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1980), EPUB edition, discussion of Deuteronomy 24:1–4.

[75] Craig S. Keener, "Remarriage for Circumstances beyond Adultery or Desertion," in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*, ed. Mark L. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 103–20, especially 107–9.

adultery." This passage emphasizes the responsibility borne by a husband who puts away his wife without the specified cause. Neither passage warrants treating the exception as an incidental qualification whose meaning may be determined independently of the marital controversy Christ was addressing. The interpretation of this exception is decisive. Should the exception qualify the combined acts of putting away one's wife and marrying another, the passage permits remarriage under the stipulated circumstance. Contrarily, should it authorize separation alone while preserving an absolute prohibition against remarriage, the permissible scope is substantially more restrictive.

The phrase **"except it be for fornication" (Mt 19:9)** necessitates closer lexical investigation. It bears repeating that both Ruckman and Ryrie have noted that certain restrictive interpreters maintain that πορνεία designates sexual misconduct discovered during betrothal or an unlawful union, rather than adultery committed within a legitimate marriage.[76] Such constructions would preclude interpreting the exception as authorization for the dissolution of a consummated marriage followed by remarriage. Their validity must be established through biblical usage rather than presumed from the existence of a separate Greek designation for adultery. In Matthew 5:28, the Lord identifies lustful looking as adultery committed in the heart, thereby exposing the moral gravity of sexual unfaithfulness without requiring every related sexual offense to bear an identical designation. In 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul characterizes as **"fornication"** a man's possession of **"his father's wife,"** describing sexual misconduct involving a relationship of marital significance. Although neither passage independently resolves the semantic question concerning πορνεία in Matthew 19:9, their testimony weighs against restricting the term categorically to premarital misconduct or an invalid betrothal.

The corporeal significance of fornication warrants further consideration. Genesis 2:24 establishes the one-flesh union as a defining characteristic of marriage, while 1 Corinthians 6:16 employs the same language concerning a man joined to a harlot. Paul's appropriation of the creation account demonstrates the peculiar gravity of fornication in relation to marital exclusivity. Such an analogy does not imply that intercourse with a harlot constitutes a lawful marriage. Instead, it explicates why the Lord could identify fornication as an exceptional transgression bearing directly upon the marital relationship. The argument favoring a broader interpretation of the exception must ultimately derive from the language and context of Matthew 19, considered in conjunction with these related passages, instead of an unwarranted identification of sexual intercourse with a legitimate marital covenant.

The opposing interpretation deserves a fair statement. Certain interpreters maintain that Christ's exception authorizes divorce without permitting a subsequent marriage, while others restrict its application to an unlawful union rather than the dissolution of a legitimate marriage. Conversely, proponents of a broader construction understand the exception as qualifying the combined acts of putting away one's spouse and marrying another. The restrictive interpretations emphasize the permanence of marriage established in the creation account and caution against

[76] Peter S. Ruckman, *The Book of Matthew* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1970), 453–54; Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," 187–88.

allowing an exception to nullify the general prohibition. The broader construction gives particular attention to the syntax of Christ's declaration and the controversy originally presented by the Pharisees. Any conclusion concerning the pastoral qualifications must reckon with the textual foundations of these competing interpretations rather than presuppose the resolution of their disagreement.

B. Romans 7 and the Marriage Bond

Romans 7:1–4 constitutes one of the principal biblical passages invoked in opposition to remarriage during the lifetime of a former spouse. Paul declares that a married woman remains bound to her husband throughout his lifetime and that her union with another man while her husband lives causes her to be called an adulteress.[77] Death, on the other hand, terminates the marital obligation and releases her from its binding authority.

The immediate purpose of the passage concerns the believer's relationship to the law rather than the formulation of an exhaustive doctrine of marriage and divorce. Paul employs the marital relationship to illustrate the principle that death terminates an otherwise binding legal obligation. The analogy culminates in his declaration that believers have become **"dead to the law by the body of Christ" (Rom 7:4)**.

This distinction occupies a central position in Ruckman's argument. He maintains that the woman described in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, having received a bill of divorcement, is no longer bound in marriage to her former husband and may lawfully enter a subsequent marital union.[78] However, Romans 7 contains no intervening divorce.[79] In Ruckman's judgment, the apostle's condemnation of a woman joined to another man while her existing marital relationship remains intact cannot legitimately be extended to one whose former marriage has already undergone lawful dissolution.

The disagreement between Ruckman and Das turns upon the nature and duration of the marital bond itself. Ruckman maintains that a lawful dissolution terminates the preceding marital relationship,[80] whereas Das understands Paul's language as evidence that the obligation remains binding until death.[81] Their competing interpretations cannot be resolved by appealing solely to the fact that the former spouse remains alive, since the legal and theological significance of that circumstance constitutes the principal matter in dispute.

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[77] Ruckman, *Book of Romans*, 253; Peter S. Ruckman, *The Books of First and Second Corinthians* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 2002; reprint, 2023), 129–31.

[78] Ruckman, *Book of Romans*, 253–54.

[79] Ruckman, *Book of Romans*, 253; Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 129–31.

[80] Ruckman, *Book of Romans*, 254; Das, *Remarriage in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), EPUB edition, discussion of Romans 7.

[81] Das, *Remarriage in Early Christianity*, discussion of Romans 7:1–4.

C. First Corinthians 6–7

The relationship between sexual intercourse and the marital covenant assumes a special place in 1 Corinthians 6:15–20. Paul admonishes believers against joining their bodies to a harlot, invoking the one-flesh union established in the creation account to demonstrate the corporeal and spiritual gravity of fornication.[82] **"What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh" (1 Cor 6:16)**.

Ruckman emphasizes the force of the one-flesh expression in this passage, construing sexual union as constitutive of marriage in a corporeal sense, even in the absence of a formal ceremony.[83] His argument recognizes a fundamental biblical principle, viz., that the physical body cannot be divorced from the moral implications of sexual conduct.[84] The exegetical question is whether Paul intends to identify every sexual union as a legitimate marriage or to expose the grievous incongruity of joining a member of Christ to a harlot. The latter interpretation better preserves the distinction between fornication as a prohibited act and marriage as an honorable institution. This distinction must be established before Ruckman's construction can properly inform the broader argument concerning divorce and remarriage.

This distinction carries weighty ethical implications. Sexual intercourse may constitute a profound violation of marital exclusivity without thereby establishing a legitimate marital union between the participants. To contend otherwise would imply that adultery simultaneously dissolves an existing marriage and establishes another through the very commission of the prohibited act. Such a conclusion would render the biblical distinction between marriage and fornication exceedingly difficult to maintain.

Paul's most explicit instructions concerning marital separation appear in 1 Corinthians 7. Addressing married believers, he enjoins the wife not to depart from her husband and the husband not to put away his wife. He thereafter addresses the distinct circumstance of an unbelieving spouse's departure, declaring, **"But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace" (1 Cor 7:15)**.[85]

The instruction governing married believers is unambiguous. **"But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife" (1 Cor 7:11)**. This restriction cannot be casually disregarded simply because Paul proceeds to address the departure of an unbelieving spouse. His injunction underscores the gravity of marital separation and the importance of reconciliation. The exegetical question arising in verses 12–15 concerns whether an unbeliever's departure introduces a materially different circumstance from that contemplated in the preceding instruction.

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[82] Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 127–40.
[83] Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 128.
[84] Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 127–28.
[85] Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 146–48.

In verse 15, Paul declares that the deserted believer **"is not under bondage in such cases."** This verse establishes that the Christian is under no obligation to compel the unbelieving spouse to remain. Whether the release also confers liberty to remarry remains contested. Proponents of remarriage maintain that the exemption is substantive, reasoning that Paul's injunction concerning peace would be frustrated by the perpetuation of a marital obligation already repudiated by the unbelieving spouse. Restrictive interpreters contend that release from the obligation of cohabitation does not necessarily entail dissolution of the marital bond. The distinction between the language of bondage and the terminology of being bound to a spouse requires careful exegetical consideration. Neither interpretation may legitimately claim that its conclusion follows inexorably from the wording itself. Das develops the restrictive objection at considerable length, arguing that Paul deliberately refrains from employing the terminology found in ancient divorce documents to signify freedom to remarry.[86] In Das's judgment, the declaration that the deserted believer is no longer enslaved does not abrogate the prohibition against remarriage expressed in verses 10–11.[87]

The disputed language of 1 Corinthians 7:27–28 assumes particular importance in the present controversy. Paul writes, **"Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you" (1 Cor 7:27–28)**. The argument favoring permissible remarriage derives considerable force from the contrast between being bound to a wife and being loosed from one. This juxtaposition naturally suggests a preceding marital relationship from which the individual has been released. Moreover, Paul's express declaration that marriage under the circumstances described does not constitute sin appears, on this interpretation, to encompass the very individual previously identified as loosed.[88]

The immediate literary setting of 1 Corinthians 7:25–28 likewise demands consideration. Paul addresses circumstances arising from the **"present distress" (1 Cor 7:26)**, counseling believers against unnecessary alterations of their marital condition. His question, **"Art thou loosed from a wife?"** admits an interpretation encompassing an individual released from a preceding marriage, although the nature and extent of that release remain disputed. Certain interpreters understand the passage as referring principally to unmarried men or widowers within Paul's broader discussion of marriage under the prevailing circumstances. The marital-fidelity interpretation receives additional support if the biblical language encompasses lawful divorce, but such an application cannot be regarded as conclusively established. The argument is cumulative, joining the language of release to the broader biblical recognition of marital dissolution under particular circumstances.

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[86] Das, *Remarriage in Early Christianity*, discussion of 1 Corinthians 7:12–16.

[87] Das, *Remarriage in Early Christianity*, discussion of 1 Corinthians 7:12–16.

[88] Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 152–54.

D. Ethical Implications

Singular to relate, Paul concludes his discussion with an express statement concerning widowhood, writing **"The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39)**.[89] Norman L. Geisler's treatment of divorce and remarriage provides a further ethical conversation partner, especially in distinguishing the moral ideal of marital permanence from disputes about permissible action under exceptional circumstances. His contribution belongs in this biblical-ethical assessment instead of in the lexical argument about μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα.[90] Even if a divorce or subsequent marriage is judged permissible, the pastoral qualifications impose additional obligations of fidelity, sound judgment, and an unimpeachable public example. Conversely, a general preference for lifelong marriage cannot without further textual argument be converted into a rule excluding every person who has lawfully remarried.

Saucy's treatment clarifies why the legitimacy of remarriage after death cannot simply be assumed to settle the qualification for ecclesiastical office. He reasons that the Bible explicitly recognizes the dissolution of marriage by death and permits a surviving spouse to marry again.[91] He also examines divorce separately, instead of treating every second marriage as belonging to the same moral category. His method reinforces the need to distinguish a lawful second union from the further question whether the candidate's entire conduct satisfies the pastoral requirement of an irreproachable reputation. Das, by contrast, emphasizes the declaration that the wife remains bound while her husband lives. He regards this statement as reinforcing the teaching of Romans 7 and the prohibition against remarriage following separation.[92]

The preceding passages disclose a consistent biblical preference for marital permanence, accompanied by disputed but substantial evidence concerning exceptional circumstances in which remarriage may be permitted.[93] This distinction also exposes a weakness in arguments that equate marital number with marital fidelity. A man who has contracted only one marriage may have repeatedly violated its obligations. Another whose former marriage ended under circumstances beyond his control may have demonstrated fidelity throughout both relationships. The number of marriages alone does not establish the comparative moral character of the individuals.

The broader biblical evidence establishes the permanence of marriage as the governing divine ordinance. Divorce is not presented as an ordinary means of escaping marital obligations, and the biblical instructions concerning reconciliation must retain their full force. The cumulative evidence favors the conclusion that the Bible recognizes certain circumstances in which remarriage

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[89] Das, *Remarriage in Early Christianity*, discussion of 1 Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:2–3.

[90] Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), EPUB edition, discussion of marriage and divorce.

[91] Saucy, "Husband of One Wife," 229–34, 238–40.

[92] Das, *Remarriage in Early Christianity*, discussion of 1 Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:2–3.

[93] Rae, *Moral Choices*, 164–65, 342.

may be legitimate. Such recognition does not establish that every divorce is justified or that every subsequent marriage is morally unobjectionable. It does establish that the existence of a former marriage cannot, without further inquiry, be treated as synonymous with adultery.

VII. Exegetical and Biblical-Ethical Synthesis

A. Interpretive Synthesis

The preceding investigation has examined the lexical construction of the pastoral marital stipulations, their placement within the biblical descriptions of ecclesiastical leadership, the corresponding requirement for enrolled widows, the historical reception of the one-spouse ideal, and the broader biblical teaching concerning marriage and remarriage. The evidence must now be considered collectively. No isolated grammatical observation, historical parallel, or theological inference should be permitted to determine the interpretation independently of the remaining evidence.

The added witnesses sharpen rather than remove the distinction between grammatical meaning and ethical application. Winer requires that the numeral retain its force, and Ellicott's appeal to him excludes the reduction of the qualification to a requirement that the candidate be married. Fairbairn argues that a marriage ended by death cannot reasonably be made the occasion of an unexplained permanent disability, although his own interpretation principally addresses concurrent marital relationships. Ryrie's lexical acknowledgment concerning πορνεία undermines an unsupported betrothal-only definition without settling the disputed permissibility of remarriage.[94] Taken together, these authorities require the present thesis to be defended through the whole biblical context and the character of pastoral office, not by claiming that any single lexical observation decides the controversy.

The affirmative scholarly case is consequently broader than an appeal to the possible idiomatic force of the Greek. Page argues from the observable character of the qualification lists and the reciprocal widow expression.[95] Glasscock emphasizes the moral character of the man's marital devotion.[96] Marfo reaches a comparable conclusion from his examination of the pastoral context, contending that the qualification concerns the quality of the marriage rather than a bare tally of wives.[97] Their arguments must still be tested against Das's historical evidence, but they demonstrate that the fidelity interpretation possesses a developed exegetical defense in its own right.

The expression μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα consists of the numeral modifying a genitive noun placed before the substantive it qualifies. Its ordinary relational sense may be represented by the

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[94] Winer, *Grammar*, 117–18; Ellicott, *Critical and Grammatical Commentary*, 40; Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles*, 416–18; Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," 185–86, 188–89.

[95] Page, "Marital Expectations," 114–18.

[96] Glasscock, "Husband of One Wife Requirement," 249–52.

[97] Marfo, "Meaning of 'Husband of One Wife,'" 117–31.

Authorized Version's **"the husband of one wife."**[98] The alternative description, a one-woman man, attempts to communicate the qualitative force that some interpreters discern in the construction.

The pastoral marital requirement appears within a series of prescriptions concerning the character and conduct of ecclesiastical officers. Paul introduces the standards for a bishop with the declaration that he **"must be blameless" (1 Tm 3:2)**. The ensuing descriptions address sobriety, temperance, hospitality, aptitude to teach, domestic government, and reputation among those outside the congregation.

This observation possesses considerable force. A lifetime numerical interpretation cannot render marital fidelity inconsequential. A man who has married only once but habitually commits adultery cannot satisfy the biblical requirement merely because he possesses an uninterrupted marital record. The reciprocal expression in 1 Timothy 5:9 provides perhaps the most important internal control upon the interpretation.[99] Paul requires that a widow enrolled for the church's assistance be **"the wife of one man" (1 Tm 5:9)**.

Howbeit, the difficulty arises from Paul's subsequent instruction concerning younger widows, wherein he mandates that **"I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (1 Tm 5:14)**. Das's restrictive interpretation must be stated before the contextual response is offered. He argues that the one-spouse language reflects a numerical ideal known in ancient society and that the widow passage may employ a more specialized category than a modern reader ordinarily assumes. He further distinguishes permission to remarry from eligibility for enrollment. The qualitative interpretation does not prevail by denying these distinctions. Its case depends upon the correspondence between the pastoral expressions, the immediate concern with moral reputation, and the absence of an express lifetime prohibition in the language itself.

This proposal is worthy of consideration, but it encounters a substantial contextual difficulty. Paul has already referred to **"the younger widows" (1 Tm 5:11)**, and the ensuing discussion addresses their desire to marry.[100] The subsequent instruction concerning younger women naturally belongs to the same discussion. Although the wording of verse 14 does not repeat the noun widows, the immediate context strongly favors their inclusion.

Hunter's further observation concerning the development of clerical and priestly restrictions requires particular attention.[101] The one-spouse qualification became associated with ecclesiastical conceptions of priesthood and with regulations extending beyond the immediate language of the Pastoral Epistles.

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[98] Glasscock, "Husband of One Wife Requirement," 250–52.

[99] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 380–81, 391–93.

[100] Das, "One-Spouse Criterion," 391–93.

[101] Hunter, "'A Man of One Wife!'" 335, 337–51.

B. Ecclesiastical Application

The broader biblical examination has established that the legitimacy of remarriage and eligibility for ecclesiastical office are related but distinct questions.[102] The ministerial-ethical dimension must be distinguished from the lexical dispute. Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter address the importance of the minister's family relationships and the public trust attached to pastoral service.[103] Their ethical framework is relevant to the application of the qualifications even where the circumstances of a subsequent marriage are judged lawful.[104] A congregation must still evaluate honesty, faithfulness, household responsibility, and the candidate's reputation, instead of assuming that a favorable conclusion about the permissibility of remarriage establishes fitness for office.

Indeed, the pastoral criteria plainly require more than the absence of conduct expressly condemned as sinful. A man may be a genuine Christian and nevertheless lack the maturity, domestic government, teaching ability, or public reputation required for the office of bishop.

The qualitative interpretation must not be mistaken for a doctrine of automatic eligibility following divorce and remarriage. The evaluation of an actual candidate must begin with the circumstances of his marital history instead of with the bare fact that a divorce decree or second marriage exists. A man who abandoned his wife without biblical warrant, engaged in adultery, or persists in conduct that brings reproach upon the church presents a different ethical case from one whose former spouse died or whose marriage ended through circumstances for which he was not culpable. Even when a subsequent marriage is lawful, the qualifications concerning blamelessness, household government, sobriety, maturity, and public reputation must still be independently satisfied.

Forgiveness and restoration must likewise be distinguished from an entitlement to office. The forgiveness of sin is a biblical promise, but pastoral oversight is a responsibility conditioned upon present qualifications and a credible history of conduct. Conversely, a congregation ought not to substitute an unexpressed rule of permanent numerical exclusion for the inquiry Paul actually requires. The moral question is not simply how many ceremonies occurred, but whether the man's relationships and reputation demonstrate the fidelity and judgment appropriate to the office.

Ruckman's treatment of the pastoral requirements provides an important theological contribution to the present discussion. He argues that "the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2) concerns the man's existing marital relationship and fidelity to the wife he presently possesses, rather than the number of marriage ceremonies or unions in his history.[105] Nevertheless, his

[102] Glasscock, "Husband of One Wife Requirement," 249–53, 254–57.

[103] Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 70–71.

[104] Trull and Carter, *Ministerial Ethics*, 70–71.

[105] Ruckman, *Pastoral Epistles*, 68.

interpretation depends partly upon his broader understanding of the one-flesh union. He regards sexual intercourse as constituting marriage in a bodily sense, even without a formal ceremony.[106] That premise requires independent examination and cannot simply be assumed.

The interpretation that the pastoral qualification prohibits simultaneous polygamy deserves separate consideration. The singularity expressed by **"one wife"** naturally excludes the possession of multiple wives at the same time. The cumulative evidence supports an interpretation of the pastoral marital qualification that principally concerns exclusive fidelity within the marital relationship. Such an interpretation does not render a candidate's marital history irrelevant, but requires that history to be examined according to the biblical standards rather than an independently imposed numerical rule.

The grammatical evidence permits both the qualitative and numerical interpretations, but does not expressly establish a lifetime prohibition against successive marriages. This conclusion does not diminish the sanctity of marriage. Instead, it requires that the sanctity of marriage be assessed according to the obligations actually imposed by the Bible, including fidelity, permanence, and moral responsibility.

VIII. Conclusion

The construal of **"the husband of one wife" (1 Tm 3:2, 12; Ti 1:6)** presents a question whose significance extends beyond the grammatical construction of an isolated phrase. It concerns the relationship between the sanctity of marriage, the moral standards governing ecclesiastical leadership, and the authority of the Bible to establish the conditions under which a man may exercise pastoral oversight. The seriousness of these considerations demands an interpretation that neither diminishes the biblical requirements nor enlarges them beyond their intended meaning.

The reciprocal stipulation concerning widows presents a further consideration. Paul's requirement that an enrolled widow be **"the wife of one man" (1 Tm 5:9)** must be reconciled with his subsequent instruction that younger women marry **(1 Tm 5:14)**. A numerical interpretation may distinguish the criteria for enrollment from the liberty otherwise granted to younger widows, but the qualitative understanding offers a more natural reconciliation of these instructions within their immediate literary setting.

Ruckman's interpretation of Romans 7 contributes an important distinction to this discussion. He understands the woman described by Paul as remaining married to her existing husband when she becomes joined to another man, rather than as a divorced woman who subsequently contracts another marriage.[107] Although his broader identification of sexual intercourse with marriage requires independent exegetical evaluation, his distinction between concurrent relationships and successive marriages exposes the danger of applying a passage beyond the circumstances it expressly addresses.

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[106] Ruckman, *Books of First and Second Corinthians*, 128.

[107] Ruckman, *Book of Romans*, 253.

Accordingly, the wording **“the husband of one wife”** should principally be understood as requiring a man whose marital conduct manifests exclusive fidelity, whose domestic relationships are consistent with the biblical ordinance of marriage, and whose character satisfies the accompanying requisites for ecclesiastical leadership. The interpretation neither grants indiscriminate eligibility to divorced and remarried men nor authorizes the exclusion of every such man without regard to the circumstances of his marital history.

The sanctity of marriage and the integrity of ecclesiastical leadership are not competing interests. Both are preserved when the marital prescriptions are interpreted according to their grammatical construction, literary context, historical setting, and the full counsel of biblical revelation. Under that examination, the requirement that a bishop be “the husband of one wife” emerges most persuasively as a demand for exclusive marital fidelity, rather than an absolute prohibition against every successive marriage.

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