

5th. Pertinent Questions that Help Guide the Evaluation of Men for Eldership

(For Discussion 5-23-10)

1) Can a divorced man or a man married to a divorced person become an elder?

There is a high standard of godliness and maturity in living a repentant life.

This summarizes the positive emphasis of the qualification lists.

Realism helps us understand that being blameless, for example, does not mean perfect or near perfect. Rather, it means that the overall thrust of his life is that of repentance, which involves *openness to the light of Scripture that exposes*, acknowledgement of sin, open-minded humility, speaking the truth with one another in love, recognizing the deceitfulness of sin, clinging to Christ, and pursuing the path of *righteousness by the light of Scripture that exposes*. Thus, while having actual blameworthiness (as in the fact of divorce in his history) this person is blameless because of the work of Christ, and the church counts him blameless because of the overarching repentant life that he lives.

In this light, it is important to make the following observations. 1) The requirement of “being the husband of one wife” does not speak to the matter of divorce in which case a person might be divorced from his first wife, and now he has a second wife. It speaks to the present state of things and addresses polygamy: a divorced person does not have two wives, whereas, a polygamist does have two or more than two wives. 2) A man may have been greedy in the past (as a confessing unbeliever or believer), but if he is repentant, his past is not to be held against him. Likewise, a sinful divorce and the sins that led to it are now to be viewed from the perspectives of the cross and the repentant life, and they are not to be held against him. 3) The case of a man that has never been through a divorce but has married a divorced person raises the question of how the conduct of a wife may “qualify” a man for eldership; we will discuss that matter below. But to this point of marriage to a divorced person, we should note again how the gospel covers a sinful divorce and the sins that led to it (whoever may be the “innocent” party). Moreover, our Lord’s teaching that whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Mat 5.32) is qualified by two exceptions: a) divorce because of immorality (Mat 5.32a) and b) departure of the unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7.15). Thus, the sins of the past of a prospective elder’s wife must be viewed in charity from the perspectives of the exceptions regarding divorce, the cross, and the repentant life. Judging in charity is surely what we all want regarding the sins of our past (**such were some of you [in sins of x, y and z] but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God** (1 Cor 6.11). We must never forget that we are justified by grace through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ the risen Lord.

2) Can a man become an elder if he has unbelieving children?

The point is not confession of faith but faithfulness, that is, an ordered life showing good managing in the home (note the discussion of this point under the 5th commandment, 4-18-10). Accent ought to be on the godly life of repentance that a man pursues and that comes to expression in the (reasonably) ordered lives of those under his care.

3) Can a man become an elder if he has an unbelieving spouse?

Wives of deacons come into the picture in a way that, by implication at least, also applies to elders: **Their [deacons] wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.** In regard to their wives, deacons must **manage their children and their own households well** (1 Tim 3.11). The “faithfulness” of children and wives fit within the “managing” requirement of elders and deacons. That is how the conduct of children and wives “qualify” an office holder who has an overseeing and managing role in the church. Paul does not exhaust all the possibilities in these lists; pointedly, he does not speak to the case of a man with an unbelieving wife. The key is how the conduct of an unbelieving wife reflects good household management in the specifics Paul

cites, namely, being respectful (dignified and sober-minded) in word (not slandering) with stability across the areas of life in the home (faithful in all things). Evaluation of the elder/deacon² ought to take into account the difference between a believing and an unbelieving spouse, as that difference affects the nature of a life lived under good management (by love, a principle of mutuality, patience, reasonableness, and so forth). Therefore, we can assume that “breeches of respect in word with stability” may show up in any household, and they may, at times, be more pronounced where the wife is an unbeliever (the reverse also could happen). In turn, it is reasonable to conclude that the important point is that the unbelieving spouse is not allowed to go unchecked with “disrespect in word with instability” in a way that is inordinate and that shows the failure of good management by firm, patient, reasonable, and understanding love. *In principle, if an elder’s wife sins, the elder is not responsible for the specific sin, but he is responsible for how he manages a household of sinners over time, whatever may be the spiritual status of his children or his wife.* By the way, overseeing the church involves managing a household of sinners; the very idea of oversight has its roots sunk deep in the saving grace of God to needy sinners. Therefore, evaluation of a man for eldership ought to be discerning, exercise charity, focus on loving management, and accent the godly life of repentance as primary.

Conclusion

Some men may apply a hard and fast, wooden-literal, black and white reading of the qualification lists. Thus, they miss the importance of reading the lists in light of the principles of realism, the spiritual intent, and the repentant life. Although they may cast the first vote for themselves to be elders, it is most likely the case that they are the first ones that ought to be denied this office. Therefore, *what the church looks for in evaluating men for eldership ought to be that to which the church is willing to submit:* to a man who exercises charity, practices loving management, and lives the godly-repentant-life.