

Man of one Woman / Woman of one Man

This phrase appears three times concerning men, 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 3:12; Titus 1:6 and one time concerning women, 1 Timothy 5:9 (same words, different order). So whatever the phrase means, it means the same in all four verses, concerning both men and women.

Most translations are consistent with themselves on the men passages vs. the widow passage, interpreting both to mean the same thing. But there are exceptions. The NIV (1984) has “husband of one wife” for men but “faithfulness” for widows (Their first choice. See NIV note).

Marital relationship is determined by context. There is no separate word for “husband” or for “wife” in New Testament Greek. A literal translation would be “man of one woman” and “woman of one man.”

Consider each of the five possible translations and/or meanings and objections to each:

1. “husband of first wife” and “wife of first husband”

Meaning – Only someone currently married to his or her first, and only, spouse. The Greek word “*mia*” can mean “one” or “first”.

Objection - The widow wouldn’t currently be the wife of her first husband. (1 Timothy 5:9)

Objection - This would mean widowers could not be overseers or deacons. If a man is serving as an overseer, and his wife dies, he would have to resign as an overseer if he remarried.

Objection - Single men could not serve as overseers or deacons.

2. “husband of one wife” – no polygamy

Meaning – A person who is only married to one person at a time.

Objection - Polygamy was practiced by Hebrew husbands in the Old Testament, but not Greek or Roman husbands. There is no evidence that Hebrew men were still practicing polygamy in the days of Jesus.

Polygamy was not practiced by women, making the statement about widows meaningless, 1 Timothy 5:9.

Objection - If this is so, then polygamy would be okay for all members of the church except overseers and deacons, something that is seen nowhere in the New Testament.

3. “husband of one wife” – no remarriage

Meaning - This interpretation would preclude those who have been divorced or widowed and remarried from serving as overseers or deacons.

Objection - Paul teaches that there is nothing wrong with remarrying when your spouse dies. In fact he tells the younger women that they should remarry (1 Timothy 5:14). This would mean that if, later, their new husband dies, and they have no other relatives, that they still could not be put on the list of widows. So Paul is telling them to do something that may hinder them later.

Objection - There is no interpretive justification for making this phrase mean divorced, and not widowed. Based on the text, it either means both, or neither.

Objection - It would be problematic to say no divorce at all when Jesus allowed for divorce in the case of adultery (Matthew 5:32), and Paul allowed for divorce if your un-Christian spouse divorced you because you were now a Christian (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Objection - Even if it should really be translated as 'one wife', it is not saying "of only one wife" as the NIV suggests. (The word "but" does not appear in any of the three passages.) We could just as easily assume that Paul meant something like "at least one wife" without mistranslating any more than the NIV does.

Objection - If our pastor's wife died, and he remarried, he would have to resign?

Objection - A person could have committed murder years ago, and now be an overseer, but if he got divorced years ago, he cannot be an overseer now?

Objection - It would imply there is something basically wrong, even if only in a minor way, with being married twice. And yet there is no other hint anywhere in scripture to support that.

Objection - Paul encourages both men and women to be married. And if they end up widowed, even divorced (for the correct reasons), they are free to marry again. In fact he encourages them to marry again, with the condition that they marry a Christian.

Objection - Why would Paul encourage young widows to remarry knowing that if they have no children and end up a widow a second time, they would not be qualified for the widows list?

Objections to options 1, 2, & 3: All of the other qualifications to serve as an overseer or deacon concern current behavior and reputation, not something that may have happened years ago. Many men married only once are unfaithful to that wife.

4. "faithful to wife"

Meaning – The phrase is an idiom or figure of speech. For example, the phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" was not meant to be literal but meant the land was highly fertile.

So, possibly, this phrase, "man of one woman," is a figure of speech meaning "to be faithful to your spouse." This would mean being faithful either to the last one you had, if you are widowed or divorced, or your current spouse.

An overseer must be faithful to his current wife. A deacon must be faithful to his current wife. An overseer or deacon, if widowed, must be known to have been faithful to his wife. And a widow, in order to be on the List of Widows, must be known to have been faithful to her

husband. If single, an overseer or deacon must be chaste. It seems unlikely that you had to be married to be an overseer or deacon since that would mean that though Paul could be an apostle and a church-planting missionary who appoints overseers in the churches, he himself could not be an overseer since he was single.

5. “have to be married”

Objection - This doesn't fit the widow.