

On the Scriptural Qualifications for *Overseers* in the Pastoral Epistles and their Contemporary Application

This paper's goal is to provide the Church of the Lutheran Brethren with a resource as it considers the interpretation and application of the qualifications for certain leadership positions as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. This research is specifically being explored in the context of the contemporary question about whether or not divorced and remarried men should be considered candidates for ordained positions in the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. While much of the research focus of this paper is devoted to interpreting the phrase *μᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα* and its equivalents found in 1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12 and Titus 1:6, it needs to be stressed that these passages need to be read in their context(s), and this specific phrase should not be given an undue weight compared to the other qualifications in these lists. This paper will argue that the various qualification lists in the Pastoral Epistles are general, qualitative, and not exhaustive of all considerations for leadership candidates. Concerning the phrase *μᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα*, this paper will argue that it should be interpreted as describing the quality of faithfulness to one's wife. Implications for the contemporary situation will follow at the end.

Before examining the qualification lists in 1 Timothy and Titus, a few comments need to be made about the applicability of these lists to today. On the one hand, these are specific qualifications given by Paul to specific people, Timothy and Titus, who were working in specific places, Ephesus and Crete, at a specific time, 1st century AD. In the contemporary Church of the Lutheran Brethren, the situations are quite different. Most CLB churches have been established for some time, the CLB ordination process has a scope transferrable beyond one particular locality, and many of the roles of a 1st century "overseer," "elder," or "deacon" are different from the roles of contemporary pastors and elders. However, on the other hand, the CLB has—like many Christian churches—see these qualifications as directly applicable to the vetting of candidates for ordained ministry. Seeing that Paul employed similar qualification lists for various roles¹ and provided similar lists to different people in different places, the general applicability of these qualifications to contemporary ordained leadership positions is well-founded.

Furthermore, it should be observed that most of these qualifications are not beyond the scope of what should be desired of all believers.² There is no tier where leaders should strive to these standards while lay people should settle for lesser standards. As with church leaders, lay people should give consideration to how these qualifications can be lived out in their own lives. Similarly these lists should not be seen as only qualifications to be considered for ordained positions. While the CLB has typically only rostered commissioned, licensed, and ordained positions, local congregations should give consideration to the qualifications in these lists for any church position.³

While it may be tempting to simply examine the interpretation of the Greek phrase *μᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα*, it must be stressed that this phrase alone should not be given any undue weight in comparison with the other qualifications in these lists. Thus, an examination of that one qualification must set that

¹ "Overseers" 1 Tim 3:2; "deacons" 1 Tim 3:8, 10, 12; "elders" Titus 1:6; cf. also the similar qualification list for "widows" in 1 Tim 5:9

² "With the possible exception of *διδασκτικόν* ('able to teach') in 1 Tim. 3.2 and *νεόφωτον* ('not a recent convert') in 1 Tim. 3.6, the characteristics mentioned are not uniquely applicable to church leaders but are qualities which all Christians are to manifest." Sydney Page, "Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993), 115.

³ Note how Paul gives qualification lists for "deacons" and "widows."

discussion in the context of all the given qualifications. This is best done by first identifying the various lists to be discussed.

Paul includes qualification lists for certain positions in 4 places in the pastoral epistles: 3 places in 1 Timothy, and 1 in Titus. In 1 Tim 3:1–7 he speaks of “overseers.” In 1 Tim 3:8–13 he speaks of “deacons.” In 1 Timothy 5:3–10 he speaks of “widows.” Finally, in Titus 1:5–9 he speaks of “elders.” Although it appears that there was not a clearly defined and unified form of church governance at that time, most people see the roles of “overseers” in 1 Tim 3 and “elders” in Titus 1 as synonymous.

A quick examination of these lists—especially comparing the synonymous “overseers” and “elders”—shows that these lists cannot be considered exhaustive. Although most qualifications appear in both sections, certain qualifications appear in one and not the other. These lists are organized in the chart below:

“Elder” Titus 1:5–9	“Overseer” 1 Tim 3:1–7	“Deacon” 1 Tim 3:8–13	“Widow” 1 Tim 5:3–10
		dignified	
		Not double-tongued	
Above reproach	Above reproach	Blameless	Without reproach
Husband of one wife	Husband of one wife	Husband of one wife	Wife of one husband
	Sober-minded		
Children are believers	Manage household well/keep kids in submission	Manage children and households well	Brought up children
			Reputation for good works/devoted to good works
Not open to charge of debauchery	Respectable		
Not open to charge of insubordination			
Not arrogant			
Not quick-tempered	Not quarrelsome		
Not drunkard	Not drunkard	Not addicted to much wine	
Not violent	Not violent		
	gentle		
Not greedy for gain	Not a lover of money	Not greedy for dishonest gain	
Hospitable	Hospitable		Hospitable
			Washed the feet of the saints
			Cared for afflicted
Lover of good			
Self-controlled	Self-controlled		
Upright			
Holy			
Disciplined			
Holds firmly to word			

		Holds mystery of faith with a clear conscience	
Able to give instruction	Able to teach		
Able to rebuke			
	Not a recent convert		Not less than 60
	Well thought of by outsiders		

What should be observed is that these lists are neither exhaustive (as mentioned above), nor terribly specific. Outside of a few discreet categories, the thrust of these categories appears to favor generalized qualities, which are to be determined by subjective judgment. Even the qualification that an “overseer” must not be a recent convert involves a subjective judgment. How recent is too recent? A month? A year? Paul gives no black-and-white rule on this, but does provide a reason for his concern. It is up to Timothy’s judgment whether or not a candidate for “overseer” is too recent of a convert that he will fall into Paul’s concern.⁴

The qualitative aspect of these lists is perhaps one of the most important observations to make. It may be observed that the general qualification of “above reproach” covers all of the other categories, and the rest are just expansions and examples of what that means. These are not simple checklists of requirements that will identify new leaders. These are qualities to consider when reflecting on a certain candidate.⁵ As Paul says elsewhere, certain qualities will be stronger in some, and weaker in others.⁶ There is no absolute threshold for these qualities, but if something contrary to these qualities is present in a candidate, one needs to use their discernment before receiving them into one of these positions.⁷

While many of these categories are generally self-explanatory, the phrase “husband of one wife” has elsewhere been left in the Greek⁸ in this paper, because the very question of how to translate it into English is one of the questions this paper seeks to understand. A woodenly literal translation that does not appreciate the differences in languages might translate this as, “a man of one woman.” It has been translated various ways in English Bible translations, mainly either, “husband of one wife”⁹ or, “faithful to his wife.”¹⁰ These two translation options present two different streams of interpretations of this phrase—though four main interpretations are generally given that might feed into these two streams.

The four main interpretations of this phrase are that the qualification states the candidate (1) must be married (as opposed to celibate), (2) must not be a polygamist, (3) must not be remarried,¹¹ or (4) must be faithful to their wife.

⁴ Note that he does not give the same requirement to Titus as he considers “elders.”

⁵ Note that the context of 1 Tim 3:1 suggests candidates might even volunteer.

⁶ E.g., Rom 12, 1 Cor 12.

⁷ For a very helpful article on the application of these lists to specific contemporary situations, see David J. Vallesky, “The Pastor Must Be ‘Above Reproach’: an Examination of ἀνεπίλημτος (1 Timothy 3:2) and ἀέγκλητος (Titus 1:6) with Application to the Public Ministry of the Gospel,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 96 (1999), 194–207.

⁸ μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα in 1 Tim 3:2

⁹ ASV, HCSB, ESV, KJV, NASB “married only once” in NRS.

¹⁰ NIV, NLT, CJB “faithful to their spouse” in CEB.

¹¹ The remarriage understanding is occasionally divided between (1) remarriage after divorce, or (2) remarriage after a death. This division will be addressed below.

Grammatically, all positions are possible interpretations.¹² Also, there are no decisive parallels of this phrase in other Greek literature.¹³ Culturally, it is possible that the apostle Paul could have been defending against any of the four practices. Additionally, each of these interpretations of this phrase can be supported through citations from early church fathers.¹⁴ While it may appear that this ambiguity is too great for any resolution, some helpful observations can be made from within Paul's epistles themselves that narrow the likelihood of interpretive options.

Concerning category (1), although potentially supported by the qualification in 1 Tim 3:4–5, which speaks of managing one's household and children well, Paul's comments in 1 Cor 7:7-8 would conflict with the anti-celibacy interpretation.¹⁵ There, Paul asserts that it is good to remain single as he is, and expresses the wish that all could be as he is. The fact that Paul exhorts others to remain single elsewhere (and extols that he himself is single) strongly argues against seeing this phrase as disallowing celibacy.

Concerning category (2), there is an important connection to make to the widow qualification list in 1 Tim 5:9–10. In 1 Tim 5:9, Paul states the widow should be ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή. This is the exact same construction as the phrase from 1 Tim 3:2 (and other places), except the roles of woman and man have been switched. Thus, it could be translated, "a woman of one man." The mention of this same requirement for widows strongly argues against seeing this phrase as disallowing polygamy.

Concerning category (3), the above connections with 1 Cor 7 and 1 Tim 5 can be furthered. In 1 Tim 5:14, Paul actually encourages younger widows to remarry, rather than remain single. This advice is also given in 1 Cor 7:9, that widows might remarry.¹⁶ Furthermore, Paul also grants freedom to a deserted spouse in 1 Cor 7:15. The encouragement to remarry—especially in 1 Tim 5:14 where the immediate context requires qualified widows to be "of one man," strongly argues against seeing this is a prohibition against remarriage.

However, a distinction can be made between remarriage after death, and remarriage after divorce. Thus, some might assert that Paul makes this qualification to disallow only divorced-and-remarried persons from serving in leadership positions. While this is a possible interpretation, it is doubtful for at least three reasons.

First of all, Paul does not explicitly mention divorce anywhere in the pastoral letters. If he had great concern to make a stand against divorce and remarriage with qualifications for leadership, one might also expect him to include an exhortation against divorce and remarriage somewhere in these letters. Throughout the pastoral epistles, he does give advice on family life, including multiple exhortations to

¹² Cf. Mounce's comment: "It is also often said that the awkwardness of the expression argues against a specific interpretation, but that argument can be applied to all interpretations. Paul could have said clearly (1) 'Must be married,' (2) 'Not polygamous,' (3) 'Faithful to his wife,' or (4) 'Not remarried/divorced.'" William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 170.

¹³ Page, "Marital Expectations," 106. See also, Peter Trummer "Einehe nach den Pastoralbriefen: zum Verständnis der Termini *mias gynaikos aner* und *henos Andros gyne*," *Biblica* 51 (1970), 477. Though note the analogies identified by Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus*, Anchor Yale Bible 35 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 79. Note also the Roman *univira* concept, as described in Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel, "Univira: an Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society," *Church History* 46 (1977): 19–32.

¹⁴David 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 (2015), 334.

¹⁵ See also the further context in 1 Cor 7:1–40.

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 7:39 as well.

spouses. He also specifically speaks to the forbidding of marriage as a prominent false teaching in 1 Tim 4:3. If Paul was speaking against divorce and remarriage with this qualification phrase, it would seem likely that he would also address his concerns over divorce elsewhere, and speak to the issue of remarriage for the divorced as well.

Second, the statement Paul makes in 1 Cor 7:15, that a deserted spouse is not bound, likely entails that the deserted spouse is not only free from their first marriage relationship to live as a single, but also free from their first marriage relationship to pursue remarriage.¹⁷ This inference is on solid ground because of the similar language used in 1 Cor 7:39, where he says that a woman whose husband dies is not bound, but is given freedom that explicitly includes the freedom to remarry. If Paul allows remarriage in cases of desertion, it makes it more difficult to see him disallow such men from leadership—though not impossible.

Third, the context of the other qualifications in these lists suggests that this phrase should not be seen as a yes-or-no requirement concerning a divorce and remarriage history, but rather an additional “qualitative” measure of this candidate. This observation leads into the final interpretation of this phrase, (4) that the candidate must be faithful to one’s wife.

There is no black-and-white measure for how “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, or hospitable” a candidate must be to qualify. Neither is it clear how strong one’s teaching gifts must be to qualify as an overseer, nor how one should measure how quarrelsome a candidate is, nor how submissive one’s children have to be in order to qualify as an overseer. The general thrust of these categories simply identifies qualities to consider when reflecting on potential candidates. They are neither simple yes-or-no checklists, nor exhaustive of every potential consideration.¹⁸

Thus, this observation is most fitting with interpretation (4), that a candidate should demonstrate the *quality* of faithfulness to one’s wife.¹⁹ This interpretation makes this qualification applicable to all married candidates, instead of simply ruling out one class of divorced and remarried persons. The general *quality* of faithfulness in a marriage relationship is much more in line with the general *qualitative* thrust of the surrounding qualifications. This qualification would then speak to various forms of marital unfaithfulness, whether one was taking concubines,²⁰ committing adultery, or in a broader perspective proving unfaithful in their relational-management of that very spousal relationship.

Contextually, this concern for faithfulness fits with Paul’s expressed concerns elsewhere in the Pastoral Epistles. As mentioned above, the pastoral epistles are lacking any exhortations concerning

¹⁷ This is occasionally referred to as the “Pauline Privilege.”

¹⁸ Vallesky, “The Pastor Must Be ‘Above Reproach,’” 197.

¹⁹ This view is the most commonly presented view today. Cf. Ed Glasscock “‘The Husband of One Wife’ Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (1983), 244–258; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, Anchor Yale Bible 34 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Andreas Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2017), Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*; Page, “Marital Expectations”; Robert L. Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974); Trummer, “Einehe nach den Pastoralbriefen”; Robert W. Yarborough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); et al.

²⁰ Köstenberger, 127.

divorce and remarriage. Paul does, however, express concern with sexual immorality in these letters.²¹ He also provides teaching to spouses multiple times, encouraging various expressions of fidelity.²² He further expressly states the forbidding of marriage is a false teaching.²³ Thus, this interpretation is not only the best fit in its immediate context, it is also the best fit for the wider context of these letters as a whole.

It should be stressed that this interpretation does not mean that divorced and remarried candidates immediately qualify for these leadership positions. This interpretation is not a lower standard than one that automatically disqualifies divorced-and-remarried persons.²⁴ It should be seen as a higher standard that applies to all married candidates as well. One might prove to be unfaithful in a variety of ways, yet not divorced (nor remarried). Thus, this interpretation becomes relevant for many more candidates, and places a higher demand on the quality of faithfulness they should demonstrate in their marriage relationships.

In conclusion, this study has important implications for the question of ordaining divorced and remarried men in the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. Perhaps most obviously, this study shows that this text *in itself* does not forbid remarried candidates for leadership positions, especially with appeal to the *μῦς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα* qualification. Depending on the specific situation, this study suggests that a divorced and remarried candidate *could* be considered. However, as it moves the discussion away from a black-and-white disqualification of remarried candidates based off this phrase, it more importantly refocuses this discussion on the full-scope of the qualification lists. Divorce and remarried candidates may not be disqualified based off the *μῦς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα* qualification, but perhaps their divorce will still render them as no longer above-reproach in various ways. Likewise, other candidates who might have never divorced or remarried might just as well be deemed unqualified because of their lack of marital faithfulness (regardless of divorce history), combativeness, poor public reputation, or the various other qualifications. In essence, all of this calls for a sincere examination process of pastoral candidates by a trusted group who has passed through the same process. Furthermore, the Pauline application of similar lists to deacons and “widows” also calls churches to use similar discretion for any church position—regardless of ordination, just as it also calls all believers to examine their own lives, and thus strive to live according to God’s will.

Finally, while this examination should drive us to strive to live according to these qualities before both men and God, it should also drive us to consider our failures to do so completely before God, so that we are driven to depend completely on His gospel of redemption. As Paul confesses in 1 Timothy 1:12–17,

“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy

²¹ 1 Tim 1:10 is the clearest example. Cf. the “passions” of 1 Tim 5:11; 2 Tim 2:22, 3:4–6.

²² 1 Tim 2:8–15; 3:4–5, 11–12; 5:14; Titus 2:4–6

²³ 1 Tim 4:3

²⁴ Cf. Saucy’s comment: “This does not mean that any person is qualified just because he is the husband of one wife any more than it means that any person is qualified just because he is no longer murdering people, or no longer getting drunk. The sinful characteristic of his life which led to sin in these areas must have been changed by God’s grace. This would take time and would require in some cases long periods of observation and the living of the changed life before his fellow believers. It must be noticed that this is not simply a negative, technical quality dealing with the legality of one’s marital state.” Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 238.

for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”