

On Divorce and Remarriage of Ordinands

*A Report of the Commission for Theological Integrity to
The National Association of Free Will Baptists*

July 2023

Preamble and Limitations

The Commission for Theological Integrity, as a commission of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, is committed to the unchanging nature of the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. While society changes, God's truth does not. An indispensable task of theology is to apply God's timeless truth to different settings and shifting cultural norms and needs. Properly understood, biblical qualifications for ordinands are trans-temporal and trans-cultural.

The subject matter of this report elicits great emotion and interest, in part because it touches on circumstances of brokenness in a fallen world. Christ, our great High Priest, has indeed given us a ministry of truth and reconciliation to address the wounds such brokenness creates. Nevertheless, the purpose of this report is confined to a particular question related to the status of divorced and remarried candidates for ordination to the ministry or the diaconate and their potential as ordinands only. Though much could be said, in limiting itself to a consideration of the resolution on this matter adopted at the 1976 annual session, this report speaks neither to the issue of divorce without remarriage nor to that of divorce and remarriage of those who are not candidates for ordination. Nor does it speak to the numerous roles divorced and remarried persons can and should fulfill in the ministry of the Church. Finally, it details neither the appropriate watchcare of associations and conferences and their responsibilities in promoting the spiritual health and vitality of associated ministers and deacons together with their families, nor the responsibility of local congregations to restore those overtaken in a fault in the spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1).

Introduction

The Eighty-Sixth Annual Session of the National Association of Free Will Baptists met July 24–27, 2022, at the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex in Birmingham, Alabama. On Wednesday afternoon, July 27, 2022, the Resolutions Committee offered its report. Item 3 from the report was a resolution that read as follows.

Resolution 3—Resolution of Reaffirmation

WHEREAS the question regarding the ordination of men that have been divorced and remarried to the office of pastor and deacon has once more been raised amongst our ranks, be it therefore

RESOLVED that we reaffirm the stated position that was included in the following 1976 resolution of the National Association of Free Will Baptists:

III. PROPER MARITAL STATE OF MINISTERS AND DEACONS (1976)

WHEREAS there continues to be a need to state the position of the National Association of Free Will Baptists on the proper marital status of ministers and deacons; and

WHEREAS each body comprising said National Association is hereby encouraged to adopt the herein presented statement or a similar position on marriage for ministers and deacons; while not insisting that any new position be made retroactive but rather established as a standard to be upheld for all new candidates for ministers and deacons; therefore,

Be it RESOLVED:

1. That Paul's statements in 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6, namely "The husband of one wife," be looked upon as making ineligible as ministers or deacons anyone who has been divorced and

remarried, regardless of the cause of the divorce or the guilt or innocence of either partner.

2. That said persons, whose marital state disqualifies them to be elders or deacons, not be discouraged in their Christian lives or Christian service, but that they be encouraged to live faithfully for Christ and serve him in the education, music, youth, or any other department or activity of the local church; and that such be reminded that deacons and elders are the only church officers for whom the “husband of one wife” prohibition is given. (While certainly it is the ideal for all believers, it is Biblically insisted upon as a requirement for deacons and elders.)¹

A motion to adopt Item 3 from the Resolutions Committee report was followed by the action of the body to table the question and refer the item to the Commission for Theological Integrity for further study relating to “the husband of one wife.” The report that follows is the statement of the Commission in response to Item 3.

“Resolution” Defined

Robert’s *Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 12th edition, discusses resolutions in section 10:13–25. A resolution serves either to express a majority opinion or direct the action of the officers and/or the organization as a whole.

In religious organizations, resolutions typically state an opinion or a position on a given question at a particular time. Often, such resolutions touch on cultural challenges the religious body is facing. Resolutions typically serve a deliberative assembly as a means of communicating the body’s “official position.” Less often, deliberative assemblies may seek to galvanize opinion and action within the body. Because resolutions are adopted by a majority vote, the majority sometimes seeks to guide the assembly to consider its actions in light of a recognized reality. The ideal of a democratic assembly ensures the rights of individual perspectives but privileges the voice of the majority.

¹ *Minutes of the National Association of Free Will Baptists*, July 24–27, 2022, <https://nafwb.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-Proceedings.pdf>.

² *Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists*, IV, p. 37 (hereafter referred to as *Treatise*.)

³ *Treatise*, IV.I.1.B, p. 37.

Thus, a resolution can also function to challenge a minority view within the assembly.

Free Will Baptist Governmental Context

Part IV of the *Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists* provides specific context for understanding any action of the body of the National Association in annual session. The following introduction is helpful in this regard.

The following is a description of the organizational practices generally followed in the Free Will Baptist denomination. It is recognized that there is considerably greater variety in actual practice than can be expressed in this section. It is not intended that the following description should require that every organization conform in every detail, so long as there is not variance from the basic principles which underlie these practices. Each organization, including the local churches and the various associations, will define its own practices by usage and/or by formal constitution and by-laws.²

Free Will Baptist polity defines the local church as “an independent, self-governing body.”³ Local churches are autonomous but voluntarily participate in local associations and conferences that in turn, usually through state associations, cooperate with the National Association of Free Will Baptists.⁴ “The authority to ordain ministers has its source in the local church,”⁵ though the churches “have traditionally *delegated* this authority” to the local association of churches.⁶ Discipline of ministers within the local association is confined to “ordination and fellowship in the association as a minister.”⁷ The association is specifically forbidden from making any determination on the role of the minister as pastor or member of the local church but is permitted to make recommendations to the local church with a warning that failure to follow the recommendation may endanger the ongoing fellowship of the church in the local association.⁸

⁴ *Treatise*, IV.I.2.B, p. 38.

⁵ *Treatise*, IV.II.1.A, p. 43.

⁶ *Treatise*, IV.II.1.B, p. 43 (italics in original).

⁷ *Treatise*, IV.II.2.E, p. 45.

⁸ *Treatise*, IV.II.2.E.3, p. 46.

The association or conference is therefore a voluntary association of local churches. It can “speak only for itself, not the churches”⁹ and can “commit only itself to a course of action, not the churches.”¹⁰ While the association may establish its own requirements for good standing, its sole power lies in the fellowship of the organization and the establishment of membership.¹¹ The organizational documents of the National Association specifically apply this same arrangement to each level of assembly. “The broader associations, at each successive level, bear exactly the same relationships to the bodies composing them as that defined above between the district association (or quarterly meeting) and the local church.”¹²

The By-laws of the National Association of Free Will Baptists stipulate that membership in the organization requires adoption of the *Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists*.¹³ This is the only stated requirement for membership by any constituent body in the National Association.

Nature of a Resolution in a Free Will Baptist Context

Given the organizational documents discussed above, a resolution in a Free Will Baptist context is a statement of opinion. When a resolution contains a directive, this directive must be limited to the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc., and its agencies. Such a resolution is specifically forbidden from being enforced on any state or local associations or conferences. A resolution of the National Association likely carries the force of encouragement to these bodies, but they alone control their membership and determine their own practices.

The Resolution in Question

In the case of the 1976 resolution, the body perceived a need to state (or perhaps restate) an understood “Free Will Baptist” position on the issue of the “proper marital state” of ministers and deacons. Whether this perception was driven by the

culture’s burgeoning divorce rate or the practice of certain congregations is not clear. It is likely that external forces were the motivation, yet internal questions could also have played some role. The resolution is clear in stating the opinion that divorce and remarriage disqualifies an individual for ordination to the office of minister or deacon. At the same time, divorced and remarried individuals are encouraged (and our churches are encouraged to allow them) to live out their Christian faith in any number of ministry settings that do not require ordination.

The proposed resolution presented in 2022, like the 1976 resolution, seems to perceive a need to restate this position. Whereas the motivation for the 1976 resolution is less clear, the language of the 2022 resolution clearly implies that there is an ongoing, internal dialogue that has raised this question to the level of a concern.¹⁴ The proposed resolution seeks reaffirmation of the theological view presented, that divorce and remarriage are disqualifying events for ordination to the office of ministers and deacons.

Historical Context

Free Will Baptists, like other religious bodies, have often felt the need to respond to ideas, issues, and practices occurring within the Christian community and civil society. One can survey prior resolutions adopted at the annual session of the National Association and correlate the subjects of resolutions with changing laws, Supreme Court decisions, and shifting opinions voiced by other religious groups. Many denominations issued resolutions following significant Supreme Court rulings such as *Roe v. Wade*, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, and *Obergefell v. Hodges*. To focus exclusively on marriage and sexuality would yield additional examples among Free Will Baptists. At the same 1976 annual session, delegates also adopted a resolution on Homosexuality and Adultery. The language of that resolution acknowledged a loosening of moral clarity on a biblical perspective on these and related sins.

⁹ *Treatise*, IV.III.4.A.2.a, p. 49.

¹⁰ *Treatise*, IV.III.4.A.2.b, p. 49.

¹¹ *Treatise*, IV.III.4.A.3.a, p. 49.

¹² *Treatise*, IV.III.4.B, p. 50.

¹³ *Treatise*, V. By-laws. Section 2, p. 60.

¹⁴ This is likely a response, in part, to a December 2021 publication that included contributions by Free Will Baptist authors and ensuing discussion surrounding denominational views and practices. See Doug Carey, ed., *Husband of One Wife: An Exegesis* (Nashville: Randall House, 2021).

The 1976 resolution was likely reacting to perceived cultural shifts. In 1970, the first no-fault divorce law was enacted in California.¹⁵ Further, in 1976 (prior to the annual session of the National Association of Free Will Baptists that July), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church articulated a position on divorce and remarriage that would have seemed unbiblical to many Free Will Baptists.¹⁶

These shifts in the larger society and in mainline Protestantism combined with a key factor: there was a clear consensus of Free Will Baptist scholars on the view that divorce and remarriage was a disqualifying event for ordinands. Most notably, J. D. O'Donnell's 1973 *Handbook on Deacons* articulated this received view on the subject just a few years prior to the adoption of the 1976 resolution.

The Received Free Will Baptist View

According to a 2020 study by the Committee on Denominational Research of the National Association, 76 percent of Free Will Baptist survey respondents said that their association will not ordain a ministerial candidate who has been divorced.¹⁷ (This is extrapolated from a statistical sample; the actual number of associations that maintain this practice is likely higher. Furthermore, the survey question simply referred to “divorced” candidates; the number of associations who disqualify divorced and remarried candidates would likely drive this 76 percent figure even higher.) These associations reflect a strong consensus position that accords with the mainstream tradition of Christianity on this question. This traditional interpretation was shared by virtually all evangelical scholars until the 1990s and is unanimously reflected in Free Will Baptist scholarship well into the twenty-first century.

¹⁵ Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky and Pamela A. Monroe, “The Effective Dates of No-Fault Divorce Laws in the 50 States,” *Family Relations* 51 (2002): 320.

¹⁶ The General Conference of the United Methodist Church issued a statement that said in part, “In marriages where the partners are, even after thoughtful reconsideration and counsel, estranged beyond reconciliation, we recognize divorce and the right of divorced persons to remarry, and express our concern for the needs of the children of such unions.” Quoted in W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 38.

That traditional position can be summarized with a quotation from the German Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke, who said that “in every case” of ministerial divorce and remarriage, including cases where the minister “is declared ‘innocent’ in civil law—it is obvious that the minister must give up his office and should be urged to do so.”¹⁸

The National Association of Free Will Baptists shared this view with almost all Protestant denominations at the time, including mainline denominations driven more by liberal theology and social policy than the teachings of Scripture. It was only as the cultural issue of divorce came to prominence in the 1970s and later that these positions would shift, but they did so slowly. It is important to note, for example, that only recently did the Church of England relax its prohibition against divorced and remarried priests, deacons (2002), and bishops (2010), and even now, considers the practice only on a case-by-case basis.¹⁹

The 1976 resolution, until and unless it is changed, remains the official “position of the National Association of Free Will Baptists on the proper marital status of ministers and deacons” (1976 Resolution). Though not requiring adoption by local or state associations, the National Association “encouraged . . . each body comprising said National Association to adopt the herein presented statement or a similar statement on marriage for ministers and deacons.” Additionally, the statement holds that “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3: 2, 12 and Titus 1:6 should “be looked upon as making ineligible as ministers and deacons anyone who has been divorced and remarried, regardless of the cause of the divorce or the guilt or innocence of either partner.” This understanding has been the unanimous, received position of our published scholars and authors, such as Robert Picirilli, Ralph

¹⁷ “Free Will Baptists and Ordination: A Report from the Committee on Denominational Research” [Fall 2020], <https://nafwb.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Ordaining-Summary.pdf>.

¹⁸ Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 176–77.

¹⁹ “CoE bishop given permission to remarry after divorce,” *Anglican.ink*, October 27, 2014, <https://anglican.ink/2014/10/27/coe-bishop-given-permission-to-remarry-after-divorce/>; see <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Marriage%20after%20divorce%20and%20the%20ordained%20ministry.pdf>.

Hampton, Stanley Outlaw, J. D. O'Donnell, and Richard Nash. The following quotations demonstrate this consensus.

Free Will Baptist Scholars on the Topic

J. D. O'Donnell, *Handbook for Deacons* (1973), *Free Will Baptist Doctrines* (1974)

J. D. O'Donnell, a former professor at Welch College (then Free Will Baptist Bible College) and later president of Randall University (then Oklahoma Bible College), affirmed the traditional position in Sunday school literature in the 1960s²⁰ as well as in two books in the 1970s:

The most natural interpretation of the phrase ["husband of one wife"] is that it prohibits divorce or any other marital infidelity in the person chosen for a deacon. Though a divorcee may be a good man, there are complications that can arise from his being elected to the office of deacon. There must be nothing in a deacon's life to prohibit him from ministering spiritually to all people of a community.²¹

Since the Scriptures hold extremely high standards for the office, the passage seems to prohibit anyone from assuming the office who has any past record of divorce or marital infidelity, even before conversion. A background problem in this area would violate the qualification of blamelessness.²²

Ralph Hampton, "Qualifications for Church Officers," *The Bible Teacher* (1974)

Ralph Hampton, professor at Welch College and long-time moderator of the National Association, offered the following comments in an adult Sunday school quarterly in 1974:

Some suggest that it merely forbids the practice of polygamy (having more than one wife at the time), but that does not seem to go far enough since that prohibition would be true for any Christian. This requirement seems to deal not only with the man's

morality, but also with the example and ability of leadership. It certainly insists that the man be sexually faithful to his wife. But it goes further than that. What questions of leadership and example might arise with regard to a pastor who has been divorced and remarried? Divorce and remarriage for almost any reason were commonly practiced in the Roman world of Paul's day. God can certainly forgive any sin involved in divorce, and the man can be a good Christian in the local church, but the bad examples can never be eliminated.²³

W. Stanley Outlaw, "Spiritual Leaders for the Church," *The Bible Teacher* (1980)

W. Stanley Outlaw, professor at Welch College, stated the following in an adult Sunday school quarterly from 1980:

Various interpretations are given for this: husband of one wife at a time, husband of at least one wife, or husband of only one living wife. It surely prohibited polygamy, but it went beyond this. The very spirit of the statement would seem to rule out from the office any person who had a record of divorce or marital infidelity. A weakness in the home life would prohibit one from assuming a leadership role in the church.²⁴

Richard Nash, "1 Timothy 3:1-7: The Ideal Pastor," *Dimension* (1985)

Richard Nash, a faculty member at Welch College in the 1980s, wrote the following in *Dimension*, the magazine of the college's graduate school, in 1985. In an article on the qualifications for ministry in 1 Timothy 3, Nash's third point was: "A divorced and remarried man cannot be a pastor." Pointing out how recent research on the rarity of polygamy in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul's day makes the interpretation that Paul was aiming only at polygamy untenable, he quoted the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, which he said noted that "Greek marriage was monogamous; indeed monogamy was believed to be the distinguishing feature of Greek as

²⁰ See J. D. O'Donnell, "The Call and Responsibilities of the Ministry," in *The Bible Teacher* (Nashville: Randall House, 1969), 155-56.

²¹ J. D. O'Donnell, *Handbook for Deacons* (Nashville: Randall House, 1973), 29.

²² J. D. O'Donnell, *Free Will Baptist Doctrines* (Nashville: Randall House, 1974), 110.

²³ Ralph Hampton, "Qualifications for Church Officers," in *The Bible Teacher* (Nashville: Randall House, 1974), 27-28.

²⁴ Stanley Outlaw, "Spiritual Leaders for the Church," in *The Bible Teacher* (Nashville: Randall House, 1980), 74-75.

opposed to barbarian culture. . . . Roman marriage was essentially monogamous.”

Nash also mentioned in passing the position of most of the church fathers, shared by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, that remarried widowers cannot be ministers or deacons. The interpretation Nash advocated

understands the phrase to exclude from the pastorate both polygamists and those who have been divorced and remarried. This makes sense because there are no textual clues to limit the phrase to polygamists (or to retranslate the phrase as “the husband of one wife at a time”), and the remarried divorcee can in no way be considered “the husband of one wife.” Nor does it matter if the polygamy or the divorce and remarriage occurred before conversion, for while salvation does make man a “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17), there is no indication by Paul that these people are exceptions to the otherwise blanket prohibition.²⁵

W. Stanley Outlaw, “1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus,” *The Randall House Bible Commentary* (1990)

In 1990 Stanley Outlaw addressed the issue again, affirming the prohibition against ordination of divorced and remarried ministers in his *Randall House Bible Commentary* on the pastoral epistles. He discounts the view that Paul is opposing only polygamy:

Some say that all that Paul is forbidding here is the practice of polygamy. . . . However, in 1 Tim. 5:9 Paul uses the same phrase, except that the husband and wife are reversed. In the consideration of desolate widows for church support, he requires that they have been “the wife of one man.” The practice of polyandry, where a woman has more than one husband at a time, has been very rare in history. It seems unlikely that such a rare problem would have been mentioned in such a list of more common qualifications. There is also no evidence that any practicing polygamist would have been admitted to the early church, and the N.T. teaching on marriage would seem to have prohibited it. If there were no polygamists in the church, then it would not be reasonable for Paul to list such a

²⁵ Richard Nash, “1 Timothy 3:1–7: The Ideal Pastor,” *Dimension: A Journal of the Word and Ministry* 1 (1985): 16.

prohibition as one of the requirements for a church bishop.

Outlaw then goes on to affirm that Paul’s statement prohibits

the ordination of men who have been divorced and remarried, or of men who have been guilty of acts of infidelity in their marriage, though this may not have led to divorce. . . . A divorced man, or a man who has been divorced and remarried, who is now living a dedicated life for God, can serve in any office in the church other than the two ordained offices. Many men in such a situation have experienced marital tragedy in their lives in earlier years but are now quite dedicated and have potential for usefulness in the church. If otherwise qualified, they should be used without hesitation. Though divorce leaves permanent scars, it must not be made the unpardonable sin.²⁶

Robert E. Picirilli, *Teacher, Leader, Shepherd* (2007)

Robert E. Picirilli, academic dean and professor at Welch College and long-time clerk and moderator of the National Association, articulated the traditional position in his 2007 book, *Teacher, Leader, Shepherd*:

Perhaps it is enough to say, here, that even if the Bible does permit divorce and remarriage in some exceptional cases (perhaps for sexual infidelity or desertion), it may still be the case that a pastoral candidate is not permitted such exceptions. Thielecke (176–77) urges that “in every case—including cases where the minister is declared ‘innocent’ in civil law—it is obvious that the minister [who remarries] must give up his office and should be urged to do so.” In accordance with this view, many churches and denominations—including those in my own tradition—will not ordain a man in such circumstances, taking this qualification to indicate (along with vv. 4, 5 below) that divorce and remarriage will hinder a pastor from the fulfillment of his duties as the leader he must be.

Picirilli then affirmatively quotes Thielicke further:

²⁶ W. Stanley Outlaw, “1 Timothy, 1 Timothy, Titus,” *The Randall House Bible Commentary*, ed. Robert E. Picirilli (Nashville: Randall House, 1990), 217–18.

“To hear the words ‘. . . till death us do part’ spoken as a vow by one who himself could not or did not satisfy that obligation can provoke offense and seriously increase the already threatening danger that the church’s blessing [on marriage] will be misunderstood as a mere conventional ceremony.”²⁷

Other Views

There are two major alternative interpretations to the one adopted by the National Association in 1976. The first is the “no remarriage after divorce or the death of a spouse” view, while the second is the “one woman kind of man” view, what some commentators refer to as the “faithful to current spouse” view. A much smaller number of interpreters throughout history have believed that “husband of one wife” prohibits only polygamy. However, this interpretation declined after the late nineteenth century, when historical research began to demonstrate that polygamy was not an issue in Paul’s time. Many interpreters who affirmed the polygamy position also supported the practice of excluding divorced and remarried candidates from ordained service.²⁸

Traditionally, almost all interpreters held one of two basic views. The more conservative view tended to be “no remarriage after divorce or the death of a spouse.” In early church history, this position required of ordinands was encouraged for all Christians, with an appeal to 1 Corinthians 7:8. The more liberal view tended to be “no remarriage after divorce.” When one reads Christian interpretations of “husband of one wife” over the centuries, one notices that almost no

²⁷ Robert E. Picirilli, *Teacher, Leader, Shepherd: The New Testament Pastor* (Nashville: Randall House, 2007), 35 (brackets in Picirilli’s original).

²⁸ In preparation for this Report, the Commission reviewed more than 400 commentaries, books, and articles by authors from a wide variety of traditions. The majority of these works were from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but the study also included numerous earlier sources. A general breakdown of the representative views of those who clearly stated a position is as follows: (1) no remarriage after divorce – 37%, (2) no remarriage after divorce or death of a spouse – 33%, (3) faithful to current spouse – 13%, (4) polygamy – 10%, (5) no unbiblical divorces – 7%. In addition, no commentators were found who expressed the “faithful to current spouse” view prior to the 1970s, when it was espoused by three

interpreters held the “faithful to current spouse” view for the first 1,980 years of church history.

Shifting Interpretations of the Text

One sees the initial development of the “faithful to current spouse” view in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by an explosion of this view in the 1990s among mainstream evangelical interpreters.²⁹ Among this group, it became a common view even though it was almost non-existent just a few decades prior.

A shift in mainstream evangelical interpretations of this passage correlates with a climb in the divorce rate and the increase in implementation of no-fault divorce laws. As sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox notes, in the years between 1960 and 1980, the divorce rate rose “from 9.2 divorces per 1,000 married women to 22.6 divorces per 1,000 married women.” He explains that “while less than 20% of couples who married in 1950 ended up divorced, about 50% of couples who married in 1970 did.”³⁰

It is also interesting that this shift in interpretation occurred almost exclusively in the mainstream of the evangelical community. Mainline Protestant, Fundamentalist Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox biblical scholarship did not demonstrate the same hermeneutical shift.

Translation of the Relevant Texts

The primary reason Free Will Baptists have typically interpreted these texts to prohibit divorced and remarried church leaders is the literal meaning of the phrase “one wife’s husband” (μιάς γυναικός ἄνδρα, *mias gynaikos andra*). Almost all English translation committees have rendered this literally, as “husband of one wife” (KJV, NKJV, ASV,

authors. Three additional authors took this view in the 1980s, and then it became a common mainstream evangelical view in the 1990s.

²⁹ The first major reference to this view appears to be found in Robert A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1974), 55. A limited number of authors adopt this view in the 1970s and 1980s, and it becomes increasingly popular in evangelical scholarship in the 1990s following the work of Craig S. Keener. See Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991).

³⁰ W. Bradford Wilcox, “The Evolution of Divorce,” *National Affairs* (Fall 2009), <https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-evolution-of-divorce>.

NASB, HCSB, RSV, NIV₁₉₈₄, DRB, REB, NET, following Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthew, Bishops', and Geneva) or "he must have only one wife" (NCV, NLV, GNT, GWT), while some more dynamic translations have rendered it "married only once" (NRSV, Moffatt, Goodspeed, NAB) or "must not have been married more than once" (JB). Almost no translation has translated it any other way than the above. It is noteworthy that the recently revised NIV (2011) changed its translation from "husband of one wife" in 1984 to "faithful to his wife," a dynamic translation shared by only one other major version, the NLT (1996).

Free Will Baptists have tended to follow a more literal tradition in interpreting the phrase much like the Puritan Matthew Henry, the most widely read evangelical commentator of all time, who said, "He must be the husband of one wife: not having given a bill of divorce to one, and then taking another, or not have many wives at once."³¹ They saw the minister in the same vein as John Wordsworth: "a man who has had relations with no other woman than his wife."³² It never occurred to them why one would translate the phrase "husband of one wife" as "faithful to his wife."

Interpretation

The vast majority of interpreters throughout Christian history have understood the phrase "husband of one wife" to constitute a strict prohibition against divorce and remarriage.³³ It is only as no-fault divorce emerged as a cultural American reality in the 1970s that the "faithful spouse" view came about and quickly gained traction in evangelical circles.

The entry for *μῆς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα* (*mias gynaikos andra*) in BDAG³⁴ gives the meaning of this phrase as "a husband married only once" and cites various uses in Greek literature for support. Likewise, Colin Brown in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* says, "The literal interpretation of the text, i.e.,

that the man should not have more than one wife who is alive, seems to fit the first-century situation better."³⁵

First Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 are best read in light of the one-flesh union of husband and wife expressed in the creation mandate of Genesis 2:24. Jesus appeals to this one-flesh union in His prohibition against divorce in Matthew 19:4. Paul appeals to this concept in numerous places (1 Cor. 6:16, Eph. 5:31). The passage clearly has God's purpose for marriage in view.

Consideration also needs to be given to the implications that "above reproach" (*ἀνεπιλημπτον, anepilēmp-ton*) in 1 Timothy 3:2 and "good reputation" (*μαρτυρίαν καλήν, marturian kalēn*) in 1 Timothy 3:7 have for the marital standing of the pastor. The traditional interpretation has held that divorce and remarriage impinge on the irreproachability of ordained church officers, affecting their reputation among those outside of the church. Prefacing both "above reproach" and "good reputation" is "must be" (*δεῖ, dei*). The general nature of "above reproach" and "good reputation" along with the repeated "must be" at the beginning and end of the qualifications function as an *inclusio* for the list.³⁶

Thus, the general qualifications "above reproach" and "good reputation," along with all the qualifications between, point to ordinands as paradigms for their congregations. The characteristics of leaders expressed in the passage serve to protect the reputation of the church in a hostile, pagan culture. While required for pastors and deacons, these qualities serve as an example for the members of the church to emulate (1 Peter 5:1–4). Paul often tells his readers to imitate him as he does Christ. Although by no means perfect, the pastor's life, by divine empowering grace, must be such that people imitate him as he imitates Christ. Gordon Wenham notes, "There is then an obvious continuity between the OT requirements for priesthood and the NT

³¹ Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: J. Wood, 1759), 426.

³² John Wordsworth, *The Ministry of Grace: Studies in Early Church History with Reference to Present Problems* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1901), 215.

³³ See footnote 28.

³⁴ Walter Bauer, Frederick Danker, and William Arndt, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

2000), 292. See the entry for *μῆς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα* (*mias gynaikos andra*).

³⁵ Colin Brown, "ἀνήρ," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology [NIDNTT]*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:564.

³⁶ An *inclusio* is a list or series in a text that has the same or similar wording at the beginning and the end. In this case, the words for "above reproach" and "good reputation" are viewed synonymously and mark the entirety of the section as a unity.

requirements for ministry. Both dispensations require the ministers to be paradigms, embodying the holiness . . . of God in their everyday relationships.”³⁷ The pastor not only teaches his people the Word of God directly, but he also teaches it through his godly conduct.

One of the most important ways a pastor is a living embodiment of the Christian life is in his marriage. Pastors and deacons are therefore held to higher standards as a requirement of their leadership positions. “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (James 3:1). While every Christian should strive for an ideal spiritual character, Scripture establishes a higher standard for leaders than for church members. One can be an active, engaged church member in good standing with the congregation and still not meet the biblical qualifications for overseers and deacons.

It is important to give attention to all the qualities listed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, yet the marital status of the pastor stands out. First, marital standing is at the head of the list. As already noted, “above reproach” functions as a general statement for all the qualities. Since this is the case, “husband of one wife” is the first qualification. In biblical languages, a word or phrase is often placed at the front of a sentence or a list to place emphasis or prominence on the item. Second, marital standing is repeated in the qualities listed. Although the requirement of managing one’s house well in vv. 4–5 specifically refers to children, marriage does not stand outside of this qualification. The health and faithfulness of marriage are the foundation for having “children in subjection with all gravity.” The explanatory clause in v. 5 speaks to the importance of the spiritual leadership of the family, which includes marriage at its essence, as an important prerequisite for leading a church.

Legalistic Focus or Theological Emphasis?

Does the 1976 resolution exalt one ordination requirement above all others? The resolution does not convey that one who is “the husband of one wife” automatically qualifies as a candidate for ordination. It does, however, focus on what could exclude one from the pastorate or diaconate. The specific wording of the resolution says

that the phrase “husband of one wife” should be “looked upon as making ineligible as ministers or deacons anyone who has been divorced and remarried.” It does not say, “The full meaning of ‘husband of one wife’ is merely ‘never divorced.’” Neither does the resolution assert that other qualifications are irrelevant or less important.

Is there a legitimate reason why Free Will Baptists would emphasize the marital background and state of ordinands or currently ordained persons? According to Scripture, the answer is yes. Some have articulated a view that sees the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 as just that: a list. It speaks to a range of ways leaders may show themselves to be spiritually suited for pastoral or diaconal ministry. This objection to the traditional view seeks to heighten the scrutiny placed on candidates with respect to all qualities, which is a laudable aim. Nevertheless, it fails to advance the conversation in three important respects: (1) it assumes that Scripture itself cannot be used to adjudicate the relative weightiness of the qualifications; (2) it ignores the actual textual emphasis on marriage and family; and (3) it too simplistically treats the descriptions as checklists.

First, the New Testament has many lists of virtues and moral qualities. One such list is the fruit of the Spirit, found in Galatians 5:22–23. Can any hierarchy be determined out of such a list? The passage itself gives no order of relative priority or importance, yet Paul says in 1 Corinthians that among faith, hope, and love, love is superior. Moreover, Jesus himself teaches that to love God and one’s neighbor are the greatest commandments. Can one then reasonably read Galatians 5 and faithfully assert, “Love is the most important fruit of the Spirit”? Given the affirmation of the internal consistency and inerrancy of Scripture, the answer is yes.

Using other passages of Scripture and their handling of various subjects as a means of assessing the meaning, nature, and function of other qualities (including those found in 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1) is a legitimate exercise. Based on biblical teaching about marriage elsewhere, one could claim that the marital

³⁷ Gordon Wenham, “The Ordination of Women: Why Is It So Divisive?” *Churchman* 92/4 (1978): 315.

background and health of a potential ordinand should be weighted heavily in evaluating ordination candidates.

Second, 1 Timothy 3 does not require simply a “one-woman man.” As mentioned earlier, Paul uses other words that have a bearing on one’s home life and reputation in the community. As he says in verses 4–5, “One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)” Divorce would most certainly speak to one’s ability to manage his household and to parent (assuming a man has children), even if the overall impact would vary from situation to situation. “Household management” is clearly related to marital background. Thus, there are three different elements of this passage that have some bearing, directly or indirectly, on one’s marital circumstance.

Third, morality and doctrine alike exist more as a fabric of truth and holiness than a list of commands and prohibitions. For example, to violate the Tenth Commandment not to covet also violates the First, which is to commit idolatry (Col. 3:5). To deny the sinlessness of Christ is, in effect, to deny the sufficiency of His atoning sacrifice. Truths do not exist in isolation from one another.

Likewise, the “list of qualifications” for a minister should be viewed as an integrated, harmonious whole. One’s hospitality is connected directly to one’s dealing with outsiders. One’s sobriety is seen in relation not only to people in general but also to family. The same could be said of gentleness and nearly all the other qualities. Therefore, ministers’ and deacons’ marital background and situation is clearly connected to their

ability to demonstrate these qualities faithfully. The metaphor of a “checklist” of qualities fails to appreciate the full integrity of Christian doctrine and the character ideals required of ordinands.

Conclusion

The perspective that “husband of one wife” rules out divorced and remarried persons as proper subjects of ordination has been demonstrated to have been the near unanimous view of Free Will Baptists at the time of the 1976 resolution. As determined by recent surveys and subsequent Free Will Baptist scholarship, this interpretive view and theological application still reflect the thinking and practice of the vast majority of Free Will Baptists. The nature of a resolution in a Free Will Baptist context means that the 1976 resolution, until and unless it is changed, remains the official “position of the National Association of Free Will Baptists on the proper marital status of ministers and deacons” (1976 Resolution) and is binding on the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc., and its agencies.

However, the framers of the 1976 resolution recognized the limits of such an action. By “encouraging adoption” by other bodies of this or similar statements, they properly limited the resolution according to the By-laws of the National Association and recognized the non-binding nature of the resolution on state and local associations and conferences. Thus, the Commission believes that the 1976 resolution reflects a prudent path that clearly recognizes the majority view on this question while at the same time acknowledging the existence of alternative views at the local level.

Appendix

