

# Adultery, Divorce, and Eldership

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## Abstract

This article applies the methodology of Integrated Theology (Smith 2013) to attempt to answer this question: ‘Can a man who has committed adultery and thus caused the failure of his marriage later serve as an elder, meeting the biblical requirements for eldership?’ After surveying various pieces of evidence, including biblical and historical evidence, the author concludes the requirements for eldership would generally exclude such candidates, but that the biblical evidence falls short of an absolute prohibition and leaves the door open for the rare exceptions that prove the rule. Therefore, a church can defend either of two positions: an exclusion position or an exception position.

## Introduction

The objective of this essay is to evaluate whether a man<sup>2</sup> who committed adultery and thus caused (or at least significantly contributed to) the failure of his marriage can later serve as an elder, meeting the

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> It is outside the scope of the present study to engage the question of whether women can be elders. The principles discussed in this article would be applicable to male or female candidates for eldership, if a church were open to appointing female elders.

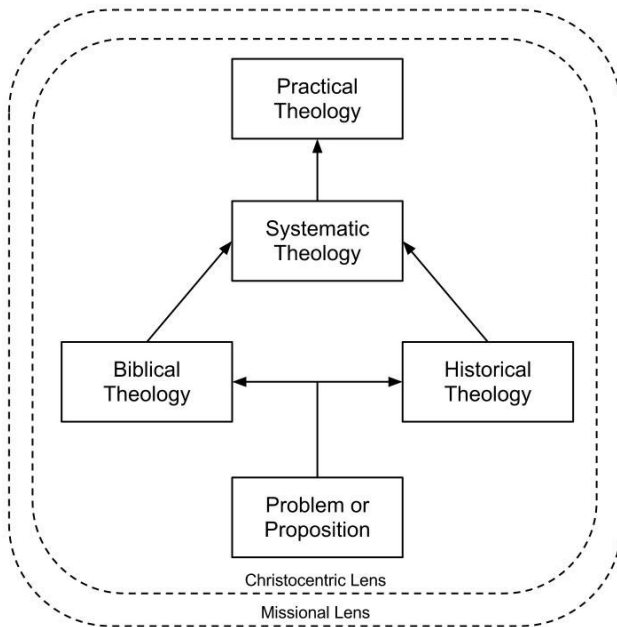
biblical requirements for eldership. The question can be posed in the form of two case studies.

**Case 1**—Bongani has served the Lord Jesus Christ from childhood. However, two years after he married Sbongile, he committed adultery. He sincerely repented of his sin, and sought to save his marriage, but she chose to divorce him. They had no children. For the past ten years, Bongani has served Christ faithfully. He has been a devoted husband to his new wife and a good father to their three young children. The leadership of his church consider him an outstanding candidate to join the eldership team, but they are uncertain whether the biblical requirements for eldership exclude him.

**Case 2**—Richard was the senior pastor of a large church. He was married with three school-going children when he had an affair with one of his congregants. As a result of the affair, he divorced his wife to marry his mistress. He stepped down from the ministry, and committed to an extended period of pastoral counselling. He has acknowledged that he transgressed the Lord's will, and he has received God's forgiveness for his sins. He fellowships at a local church, which recognises his gifting as an evangelist and teacher, and wonders if it falls outside of God's will to bring him onto their eldership team.

**The question**—do the qualifications for eldership that Paul lays down in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 permanently disqualify these men from holding the office of an elder in the local church? In other words, do the requirements permanently exclude all who have transgressed them, or does someone who is forgiven with an extended track record of subsequent faithfulness meet the requirements in spite of his earlier failings? This major question intersects many other questions, especially those related to grace, forgiveness, and restoration after moral failure.

**The method**—I shall attempt to answer this question by following the South African Theological Seminary’s integrated model of theological reflection (Smith 2013; see Figure 1). This model poses a theological problem or proposition; in this instance, the question is posed above and illustrated by means of two case studies. The next task is to examine the perspectives from the history of the church (§1) and the word of God (§2); these two steps can be undertaken in whichever order seems most practical. All the evidence is then synthesised into a theological conclusion (§5), and its practical application in the life of the church is explored (§6). The entire process is informed by the overarching perspectives of a christocentric and missional hermeneutic (§§3–4).



**Figure 1: Model of Integrated Theology**

## 1. Historical Survey

The question of whether a divorcee, who caused his marriage to fail by committing adultery, can later serve as an elder permits two basic answers. (a) *Yes*. Because God has forgiven him completely, there is no reason why he cannot be appointed as an elder. (b) *No*. Although God has forgiven him completely, the qualifications for eldership permanently disqualify him from holding that office.

The church fathers would unanimously and permanently exclude anyone who caused his marriage to fail by committing adultery from holding church office. Origen (*Comm. Matt.*, 1897:509) grappled with why a man who had been married twice, though he had been exemplary in his married life, was disqualified from holding office; he observed that often the best candidates for office were disqualified by Paul’s ‘husband of one wife’ restriction. Yet he assumed that even a man twice-married through misfortune could not hold office. In *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (c. AD 300), we find the dominant view that neither a bishop nor his wife should have been married to a previous spouse: ‘Such a one a bishop ought to be, who has been the “husband of one wife,” who also has herself had no other husband’ (*Const. Ap.* 2:2). In his letter to Oceanus, Jerome (*Hom. 1 Tim.*, 1893:141–149) takes a more gracious line than some—permitting a man who had divorced and remarried prior to his baptism to hold office in the church. John Chrysostom teaches that an elder is a model of the exemplary life to which all others should aspire, and a post-conversion scandal would exclude somebody. He argued that one who failed after conversion ‘ought to be ruled, and not to rule others. For he who bears rule should be brighter than any luminary; his life should be unspotted, so that all should look up to him, and make his life the model of their own.’ (Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Tim.*, 438). Theodore of Mopsuestia

(quoted in Knight 1992:158) interpreted the Greek phrase *mias gunaikos anēr* to mean ‘a man who having contracted a monogamous marriage is faithful to his marriage vows’. Dodd (1977:115; cf. Knight 1992:159) interprets Theodore as ‘excluding polygamy, concubinage and promiscuous indulgence’, with the last term encompassing any wrongful divorce. The portrait from the fathers seems quite clear. They interpreted ‘the husband of one wife’ as excluding anyone who was wrongfully divorced after his conversion from holding the office of a bishop or presbyter. Some would have extended the requirement to one wife for life, but there they were not in agreement.

When alluding to the husband of one wife requirement, Martin Luther mostly railed against the Roman Catholic prohibition against marriage for priests. However, he did state that he believes it is legitimate for a bishop to remarry after his first wife died (Luther 1999:339).<sup>3</sup> John Calvin (n.d.:58–59) interpreted ‘the husband of one wife’ as primarily a prohibition against polygamy. He took ‘blameless’ to mean the elder’s reputation must not be stained by anything that would disgrace his name and thus lessen his authority.<sup>4</sup> He deemed that a man who

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<sup>3</sup> Luther (1999:339) wrote, ‘If in the Greek Church there were a good minister of the Word, if he took a wife and she die, and then if he married another to live chastely, then he is frustrated in his vow, because he has sought a remedy in marriage. Paul speaks against this very thing: ‘It is better to marry, etc.’ (1 Cor 7:9). If he were to retire because he took another wife, does he not thereby destroy those very good gifts which he has given to the use of the church because of his own personal marriage relationship? This is contrary to the Holy Spirit. When a man has the gifts to be a bishop, why should two marriages hinder him?’

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library; [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.pdf](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.pdf)), 58–59. He wrote, ‘that he must not be marked by any infamy that would lessen his authority. There will be no one found among men that is free from every vice; but it is one thing to be blemished with ordinary vices, which do not hurt the reputation, because they are found in men of the highest excellence, and another thing to have a disgraceful name, or to be stained with any baseness.’

remarried after his wife’s death remained ‘the husband of one wife’ (p. 240). John Wesley (2012, note on 1 Tim 3:2) interpreted Paul as excluding a divorced or polygamous man. Adam Clark (1831, note on 1 Tim. 3:2), a Methodist, wrote on 1 Timothy 3:2, ‘The apostle’s meaning appears to be this: that he should not be a man who has divorced his wife and married another; nor one that has two wives at a time.’

With respect to our key question—whether a wrongfully divorced man can serve as an elder—church history seems to speak with one voice: the requirement that an elder be *blameless* and *the husband of one wife* disqualifies him. Contemporary church leaders are less convinced. For example, an impromptu survey of opinions amongst academic staff at the South African Theological Seminary turned up the following responses:

- Yes, he can serve as an elder: Dr Chris Pepler (Lonehill Village Church); Prof. Frank Jabini (Plymouth Brethren); Dr Bill Domeris (Anglican); Dr Willem Semmelink (AFM); Dr Mark Pretorius (Rhema).
- No, he cannot serve as an elder: Dr Reuben van Rensburg (Baptist); Dr Zoltan Erdey (Baptist); Prof. Samuel Kunhiyop (ECWA); Dr Elijah Mahlangu (Assemblies of God); Rev. Felix Kantonda (Baptist).

Those who answered ‘no’ follow similar reasoning to the historical sources surveyed, basing their belief primarily on the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. The ‘yes’ respondents typically bring five arguments to bear on their view. (a) The husband of one wife means the candidate must be faithful to his present wife. (b) The husband of one wife requirement is a prohibition against appointing a polygamist as an elder. (c) The requirement to be blameless refers to credibility in present lifestyle; nobody is absolutely ‘blameless’. (d) It is

alien to the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ to write a man off permanently because of his sins. (e) God's forgiveness is perfect and complete, restoring the person to the status of full sonship.

## 2. Biblical Teachings

The most important texts about qualifications for eldership are 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9; these two are so similar that it will suffice to examine 1 Timothy 3 in depth. As other biblical teachings, we shall examine the Mosaic regulations regarding the marriage of priests, explore relevant themes from the teaching of Jesus Christ (§3), and consider selected passages in Malachi that have missional significance (§4).

### 2.1. The marriage of Priests (Lev 21)

The Old Testament also does not address our main question directly, but there are some passages that provide helpful points of reflection. The most important one is Leviticus 21, which lays down marital requirements for priests and high priests. Ordinary priests were prohibited from marrying a prostitute, a defiled woman, or a divorced woman. 'They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God' (Lev 21:7).

The high priest had to marry an Israelite virgin; he was prohibited from marrying a widow, *divorcee*, prostitute, or a defiled woman. 'And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people' (Lev 21:13–14).

The reason for these requirements was that they were holy to the Lord, and they were to be models of holiness that did not profane the name of the Lord. ‘... that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him’ (Lev 21:15).

These requirements cannot transfer directly to New Testament officers, but they do illustrate that God would exclude gifted men from public leadership if their track record did not model holiness. This was not a rejection of the men themselves, but a recognition that they were not qualified to lead because they could not model the holiness that God required in order for his leaders to serve as examples for the community. These laws also illustrate that a leader’s marital conduct is an important criterion for leadership in the kingdom of God.

## 2.2. The husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:1–7)

The passage begins with the umbrella requirement that ‘an overseer must be *above reproach*’. The word *above reproach* (ἀνεπίλημτος) is derived from a verb form that means ‘to seize’ or ‘to grasp’. The noun is the negative form, describing people whose life is such there is no glaring weakness or moral failing that opponents can seize or grasp to pull them down. In this sense, the word means ‘blameless’, ‘inviolable’, or ‘unassailable’ (Delling, *TDNT*, vol. 4:9). The word occurs only three times in the New Testament, all in 1 Timothy and always to describe ‘one who cannot be attacked (even by non-Christians) because of his moral conduct’ (9). In 1 Timothy 5, Paul is laying down guidelines for widows who should qualify for financial aid from the church. After stipulating that families should care for their own widows, and widows who are self-indulgent should be excluded, he says, ‘Command these things as well, so that they may be *above reproach*’ (5:7). In 6:14 Paul charges Timothy as a man of God to be *above reproach*. In each case, *above reproach* refers to a minimum set of standards, so general that



failure to keep them would bring reproach upon the church of God in the eyes of insiders and put ammunition in the hands of outsiders.

In 1 Timothy 3:1–7, *above reproach* governs a list of specific examples. In other words, it is the umbrella term and it is applied to a number of particular characteristics in which the elder must be above reproach.

The list is:

1. the husband of one wife;
2. sober-minded;
3. self-controlled;
4. respectable;
5. hospitable;
6. able to teach;
7. not a drunkard;
8. not violent but gentle;
9. not quarrelsome;
10. not a lover of money;
11. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?
12. He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil, and, moreover;
13. He must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

There are several observations worth noting about this list.

Firstly, the list consists of ten short criteria (three words or less in Greek) followed by three longer criteria (sentence length). The first

item on each sub-group is a family requirement, relating to his experience as husband and father respectively. Forefronting the family requirements seems to prioritise them in each list (Smith 2006). The family requirements hold pride of place because the church is ‘the household of God’ (1 Tim 3:15). If the church is a family, its leaders need to be fathers in the house (Puffett and Faulkner n.d.; McNally 2011). Therefore, the most important indicator of a man’s readiness to lead in God’s house (*oikos theou*, 3:15) is his track record of leading in his own house (*idios oikos*, 3:5). The word translated ‘manage’ in 3:5 means to ‘guide, lead, direct’ (Swanson 1997:§4613), with a special nuance of care and concern (BDAG 2000:870).

Secondly, if we follow the ESV translation (as above), then only one of the thirteen requirements is quantifiable—‘a husband of one wife’. All the other qualities are a matter of judgement or interpretation. Whether a candidate for eldership is self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, or a lover of money is a matter of interpretation. Even whether he manages his household well or whether he is a new convert is a judgement call. But at first sight, ‘a husband of one wife’ seems measurable. This immediately raises some important questions for using these criteria to evaluate candidates for eldership. How is a church to evaluate whether someone is a ‘sober-minded’, ‘hospitable’, ‘not violent but gentle’, or ‘not a lover of money’? Those nominating and appointing elders have to make a reasoned, prayerful, and Bible-based judgement call on these criteria. They have to interpret the candidate’s character in the light of Paul’s criteria.

When the criteria are applied to evaluate a particular candidate, seldom do the existing leaders consider the distant past. They are not too concerned about whether the candidate for eldership was hospitable, gentle, quarrelsome, or loved money ten years ago. For almost all the criteria on the list—the husband of one wife requirement being the

exception—churches are satisfied if the candidate’s present lifestyle passes the test. In other words, present faithfulness trumps past failure.

Thirdly, the ‘husband of one wife’ requirement has been variously interpreted in the history of the church. The Greek phrase *mias gunaikos andra* is ambiguous. Smith (2006:31) listed five major interpretations.

- Prohibiting divorce: no divorced person can serve as an elder.
- Prohibiting remarriage: no remarried person can serve as an elder.
- Prohibiting polygamy: nobody with more than one wife can serve as an elder.
- Requiring marriage: no unmarried person can serve as an elder.
- Requiring fidelity: only a faithful husband can serve as an elder.

I have previously argued at length that option 5 is the likeliest interpretation of the phrase in its context (Smith 2006:26–41; cf. Glasscock 1983:255; Lea and Griffin 2001:109–110). An elder must be a *faithful husband*. If he is married, he is to be blameless in his faithfulness and loyalty to his wife. He is neither flirtatious nor promiscuous. He does not interact with other women inappropriately. If he is unmarried, his conduct in relation to women is pure and blameless.

If this interpretation is correct, then it means *even the criterion relating to marriage is interpretive*. The point is not about counting a man’s wives, but about weighing his character in relation to the opposite sex. He needs to be blameless in the sense of being the kind of man who can be trusted to treat all women with propriety and to be faithful to his own wife. His track record should speak to his integrity in this area.

Fourthly, the final criterion (number 13 on the list above) is closely related to the umbrella term, *above reproach*. The idea behind 'above reproach' is that nobody can legitimately point a finger at him for 'conduct unbecoming', for being a disgrace to the gospel. The final criterion says that 'he must have a good testimony from outsiders'; his appointment should not discredit the light of the church in the world. This is a crucial point: the appointment of an elder must be in the best interests of the church and its witness in the community. If there is an excellent candidate for eldership, who is now in right relationship with God but whose past actions in the public sphere would likely discredit the integrity and witness of the body of Christ, he should not be appointed. This is an interpretive judgement that must be made prayerfully.

Lastly, Paul gives two reasons for requiring that the appointee have a good testimony with outsiders: that he may not fall into (a) disgrace and (b) the trap of the devil. These two purpose statements seem intended to protect both the person and the people of God.

### 3. Christocentric Lens

The christocentric principle asks, 'what did the Lord Jesus Christ teach or model that might guide us to a proper understanding of God's will on this matter?' It asks how everything we learn about the nature, will, and purposes of the triune God, as embodied in the incarnate life of God the Son, guides our thinking on a particular question. How does all that we understand about God through the words and works of Jesus Christ help us to understand the Lord's will in a particular case or context?

What did Jesus Christ say and do that might influence our reflections? Jesus never explicitly addressed our question, so we are left to analyse indirect strands of evidence. We shall consider four strands:

1. Jesus on divorce and remarriage
2. Jesus on forgiveness and restoration
3. Peter's failure and forgiveness
4. Jesus on the woman caught in adultery

### **3.1. Jesus on divorce and remarriage**

Our Saviour's words regarding divorce and remarriage are notoriously difficult (Matt 5:31–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18). The stricter interpretations take Jesus as prohibiting remarriage as long as the divorced spouse lives, and may view the second marriage as permanently adulterous union. The middle-ground view sees Jesus as permitting the innocent party to remarry if the divorce was caused by the spouse's unfaithfulness. The more flexible approaches see Jesus's concession in the case of adultery, the so-called 'exception clause', as establishing a principle or a precedent that can apply to other sins too—if one partner has nullified the marriage covenant, the other is free to remarry. (For an excellent survey of the range of interpretive options on the problem of divorce and remarriage, see MacLeod 1992.)

Ward Powers (1987) argued that the principles of law and grace apply to divorce. Divorce is always wrong; the law forbids divorce. Marriage is a lifelong covenant before God, and the dissolution of a marriage is a sin against the vow made to the Lord. However, God always forgives the repentant divorcee; grace covers divorce. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Although some theologians still view marriage as an indissoluble union in the eyes of God, with the result that any second marriage is a permanently adulterous union, this does not seem to be the

best interpretation of Jesus Christ’s words. There are actually two different cases of divorce that our Lord addressed. They can be represented by the sayings in Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9.

### *3.1.1. You remarry after your spouse wrongfully divorces you.*

In Matthew 5:31–32, the Lord Jesus Christ mentioned this case. ‘It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.’

The man who wrongfully divorces his wife ‘makes her commit adultery’, making the assumption that she remarries. In biblical times, she might have had to remarry to survive. Even though she is innocent, her second marriage begins with an act of ‘adultery’, presumably in the sense that she had previously vowed to be intimate with only one man, and now she is breaking that vow, albeit justifiably. Similarly, the man who marries this woman ‘commits adultery’, in the sense that he participates in her ‘adultery’. Neither the woman unjustly divorced nor the man who marries her is guilty. The only guilty part is the man who divorced the woman without cause. The sin that incurs the Lord’s censure is the unjust divorce; the couple who participate in the second marriage are innocent, even though their marriage commences with a kind of ‘adultery’, breaking the previous covenant.

### *3.1.2. You remarry after you wrongfully divorce your spouse*

The Lord’s most detailed teaching on divorce is recorded in Matthew 19:1–12 and Mark 10:1–12. For our purposes, the most important statement from each passage is: ‘And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits

adultery’ (Matt. 19:9). ‘And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery”’ (Mark 10:11–12).

Powers (1987) argues that Jesus is speaking about a man who divorces his wife *in order to* marry another; the legitimisation of adultery through legal divorce does not deceive the Almighty. This is certainly a plausible interpretation of the grammar, and even more so if the words originate in Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>5</sup> However, even if we take this more generally as a case of a man who wrongfully divorces his wife and later marries another woman, the implications remain the same. First, the act of divorce is a violation of the covenant made before the Lord, and is a sin against God, wife, and children (see the discussion of Malachi 2:13–16, p. 68). Second, the new marriage begins with an act of adultery, but the new marriage is not a permanently adulterous union.<sup>6</sup> Third, the wrongful divorce is always a transgression of the law of God, but the repentant transgressor is assured a pardon through the grace of God.

In conclusion, the Lord Jesus Christ taught that divorce is a serious sin, requiring heartfelt repentance. A second marriage following a divorce begins with an act of adultery, in that it betrays the former marriage covenant.<sup>7</sup> However, the new marriage is a real marriage rather than an adulterous union. Nothing in the Saviour’s words seems to require the

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<sup>5</sup> The challenge in the Matthew text is to make sense of the disciples’ response, which expressed shock at the strictness of Jesus’s words. The shock could, of course, be at the Lord’s absolute prohibition against divorce—divorce is always sinful.

<sup>6</sup> This was established in the discussion of Matthew 5:31–32 (see p. 14), and there is no reason to interpret it differently in Matthew 19, Mark 10, or Luke 16.

<sup>7</sup> The exception is in the case of divorce following the spouse’s unfaithfulness, in which case the other’s prior unfaithfulness has nullified the marriage covenant. The innocent party cannot, therefore, be the one who irrevocably breaks it by joining himself or herself to another in marital intimacy.

lifelong exclusion of a divorced person from holding a leadership office. Once forgiven, the person who has failed is restored to right standing before the Lord with the full rights and privileges that attach to being a child of God. The Saviour's teachings do, however, require the church to recognise divorce as a serious sin and not to treat it frivolously.

### 3.2. Jesus on forgiveness and restoration

The Lord's love for the lost and broken people of the world is legendary. His entire ministry fulfilled his claim that he had come to call sinners to repentance, to seek and save the lost. The gospels are saturated with accounts of Jesus's forgiving and restoring love touching the lives of those whom mere human beings would have 'written off'. He touched broken lives and restored dignity to them. However, these examples mostly concern our Lord reaching out to *the lost* with saving and restoring love, not to him appointing leaders who had failed morally post-conversion. To the best of our knowledge, the apostles he chose to lead the church after his ascension were above reproach in their marital conduct.

We must read Jesus correctly as concerns the relationship between salvation and sanctification. When he saved a sinner, he brought complete forgiveness and wholeness. He invited sinners to come just as they were, but he did not let them remain as they were. After the love of God transformed the sinful heart, Jesus expected the saved person to live a holy life, to produce fruit that lasts. It may or may not be a correct reading of the Lord Jesus Christ to assume he would have applied the same restorative grace to fallen leaders that he applied to lost souls.



### 3.3. Peter's failure and forgiveness

There is one example in the gospels of a leader failing and being restored by Christ. It is the instance of Peter denying Jesus three times on the eve of the crucifixion. Despite Peter's serious failure, the Lord Jesus Christ restored him to his place of leadership in the early church. Jesus seems to have viewed Peter's failure as part of his preparation. Here is the dialogue between Jesus and Peter before his failure:

‘Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.’ Peter said to him, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.’ Jesus said, ‘I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me’ (Luke 22:31–34).

When Peter realised that he had denied his Lord, he was a broken man. Mark records, ‘And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept’ (Mark 14:72). His failure shattered Peter's self-confidence. After Jesus rose from the dead, he restored Peter to leadership.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he

said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:15–17).

Before his three-fold denial, Peter was sure he loved the Lord more than anyone else did. 'Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not"' (Mark 14:29). The pride and self-sufficiency that characterised Peter's earlier response is gone from his conversation with Jesus in John 21. The humility that resulted from his failure and the Lord's forgiving and restoring love equipped him to feed and tend the Lord's sheep and lambs. Peter would be a better shepherd as a result of this experience than he would have been had he never failed and experienced the restoring power of the Lord's forgiveness.

When this argument for restoring an adulterer to leadership was first presented to me, my intuition was that the two situations were not comparable, that it was not comparing apples with apples.<sup>8</sup> When pressed to explain why the two failures are not comparable, I struggled to articulate a satisfactory reason. Peter's case is one of a senior leader, chosen by Christ, who publicly betrayed the Lord and the gospel. His restoration might serve as a sign that Christ condoned his failure, but is better used a public sign of Christ's redemptive and restorative grace. In our second case study (p. 48), Richard's sins likewise betrayed the gospel and publicly shamed the Lord Jesus Christ. If he were restored to eldership, his restoration would have the potential for double-edged interpretation, either (a) as a sign that the church is soft on sin, or (b) as a symbol that God is great on grace.

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<sup>8</sup> As best I can ascertain, nobody in the early church, including the apostles, seems to have interpreted Peter's restoration as establishing a precedent that trumps 'the husband of one wife' requirement.

### **3.4. The woman caught in adultery**

Another gospel text that bears consideration is the case of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). Despite the textual problems surrounding this pericope, it does seem to support an ancient oral tradition that faithfully represents an incident from Jesus’s life (Metzger 1994:187). Most scholars share Beasley-Murray’s (2002:143) conclusion: ‘It is clear that the story was not penned by the Fourth Evangelist ..., yet there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth.’ The Law of Moses appears to mandate the death penalty for adultery. Leviticus 20:10 declares, ‘If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.’ Yet Jesus did not slavishly follow the penalties of the law, even though he did selflessly uphold its purposes. In this case, the letter of the law seemed to compel Jesus to condemn the woman, but his response shows that sometimes the righteousness of God is better served by redemptive and restorative grace. Admittedly Jesus might have ‘saved’ the woman on technical grounds. The law, rightly interpreted, did not condone vigilante justice, and Roman law did not confer the powers of capital punishment on the Jewish people. However, Jesus chose not to condemn her, but to give her a second chance. If Jesus could choose not to follow a strict, literal application of Leviticus 20:10 in a particular case of adultery, might he also choose not to follow the ‘husband of one wife’ regulation slavishly in selective cases?

In conclusion, the evidence from Christ is that he generally upheld the high standards of the law, selected leaders whose marital faithfulness and sexual purity was above reproach, and took a hard line on divorce and remarriage. However, he also epitomised the grace of God in loving and restoring sinners. He followed the spirit of biblical laws rather than

applying them slavishly. If our Lord's teachings against divorce and remarriage are taken in the strictest sense, then they would surely exclude a divorcee from eldership. However, if we take a more moderate view of the Lord's words about divorce and remarriage, as argued above, then the redemptive nature of Jesus's ministry leaves open the possibility of appointing a wrongfully divorced man to leadership.

## 4. Missional Lens

The missional lens asks how the grand narrative of scripture shapes our understanding of God's will in a particular situation. The grand narrative tells the story of God's mission to reconcile all people to himself and to restore his kingdom reign over all creation. In other words, which position or action would best serve to advance the kingdom of God, his mission to reconcile all people to himself and restore his righteous rule over all things? There are several elements of the mission of God at stake with this question. For the purposes of this article, we shall single out two: the biblical view of the church and the restoration of marriage and family.

### 4.1. The biblical model of church is at stake

We are living in an era when many pastors look more like CEOs of spiritual corporations than shepherds of the flock of God, more like superstars than servants. The church of Jesus Christ has been commercialised, and many believers relate to their church as a dealer in spiritual services or supplies. This damages the mission of God. *In the biblical model, the church is first and foremost the household of God, the family of God. If the church is a family, then its leaders should be fathers* (Puffett and Faulkner n.d.; McNally 2011). This does not mean

that all leaders must literally be fathers, such that an unmarried man or a man without children is excluded. It means that leaders are to function as fathers in the household of God. Therefore, if they are literal fathers, their track record with their own family is the best indicator of their suitability for fathering the children of God.

If we buy into a commercialised, programme-based approach to church, the selection of leaders will tend to prioritise giftedness over godliness. This is evident in contemporary church. Local churches are often resource-starved organisations desperate for leaders. When able men avail themselves, there is a great temptation to ‘snatch them up’ with little regard for their character flaws. Scripture and history are replete with examples of the danger of giving power to men with dubious character—it destroys the man, and the man destroys it. Abraham Lincoln astutely observed, ‘Nearly all men can handle adversity; if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.’<sup>9</sup>

Paul rightly noted, ‘if someone does not know how to manage [rule] his own household, how will he care for God’s church?’ (1 Tim 3:5). Many years earlier, Solomon taught that it is even more important to know how to rule one’s own spirit. He wrote that ‘he who rules his spirit [is better] than he who takes a city’ (Prov 16:32b), and ‘whoever has no rule over his own spirit, is like a city broken down, without walls’ (Prov 25:28, NKJV). To give power to a man who has proven inconsistent in ruling his own spirit and his household is to court a crisis.

If a person who has shipwrecked his first marriage through his lack of self-control were to be appointed as an elder, it *might* send the message that charisma is more important than character, gifting than godliness,

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<sup>9</sup> This statement is attributed to Abraham Lincoln on numerous websites, but I have not been able to track down the original source.

and that the church is more a commercial enterprise than the household of God. *Valuing gifting above godliness contravenes the biblical value system, and is unlikely to be in the best interests of the church of Christ and the mission of God.* Those seeking to be faithful to Jesus and Paul in their selection of leaders would do well to ask themselves the self-critical question, 'Is this candidate's gifting causing us to overlook serious character flaws?'

#### 4.2. The restoration of the family is at stake

From the biblical point of view, the family is the fundamental building block of church and community. From the contextual point of view, the family is in crisis. Divorce has become commonplace. The majority of children in South Africa are growing up in fatherless families, and the effects on the children and the nation are devastating. The restoration of biblical marriages and families as the incubators of godly lives must be a high priority in the kingdom mission of God.

Two passages from Malachi will illustrate the strategic importance of godly families for the restoration of God's righteous and benevolent rule.

1) **Malachi 2:13–16.** Yahweh turns his face away from men who divorce 'the wife of your youth'. Yahweh's anger burns against the man who betrays his family (2:13, 16). Two reasons are given. First, the Lord sides with the innocent victim, the betrayed wife who has been violated (2:14, 16). Second, the Lord rages against the violence done to the children. He designed a Spirit-filled marriage for raising 'godly offspring' (2:15).<sup>10</sup> Implicit in this verse is the certainty that the divorce

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<sup>10</sup> Although the Hebrew text of Malachi 2:13–16 is beset with difficulties, the major points being made here are present almost regardless of how the text is reconstructed and translated.

leaves children fatherless and bearing lifelong scars. Fathers who are faithful raise godly children, but fathers who forsake their families multiply godlessness.

2) **Malachi 4:6.** Malachi concludes with a reminder to Israel to heed the Law of Moses (4:4) and a promise that the Lord would send Elijah to bring ‘revelation, repentance, and reconciliation’ (Taylor and Clendenen 2004:463) before the coming of the day of the Lord (4:5). The proof of Elijah’s effective ministry is that he would ‘turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers’ (4:6). ‘The point is that fathers and sons would no longer live self-serving lives, but fathers will take their sons to heart and sons will take to heart their fathers, considering the effects of their actions on one another in the course of their lives’ (p. 463). This was the evidence that the kingdom rule of God, which has now been ushered in by Jesus Christ, had entered into the hearts of these fathers and sons. Where the kingdom of God comes, fathers exchange self-interest to prioritise their families.

This restoration of godly families is a kingdom priority for the mission of God. In a society in which marriages are crumbling all around, appointing Richard (Case 2) might send altogether the wrong message to the church and the community. No matter how faithful he is now, his past failure might provide a pretext for others to justify turning from their families. His presence on the leadership of the church might reinforce the cultural view that adultery and divorce are not all that serious. Richard’s priority should be to turn his heart towards his children (from both marriages)—whose inclination towards godliness is threatened by his faithlessness—and live out his repentance in ways that are redeeming and reconciliatory. He should serve in the church in ways that show humble, servant-hearted faithfulness, and act to reinforce the

message that others should not follow in his footsteps. This argument is less applicable to Bongani (Case 1), since he does not have a family torn apart by his past indiscretions.

## 5. Theological Formulation

What are we to make of this mass of conflicting evidence? It may be helpful to review the main points of evidence, and then recommend a theological position that makes sense of all the key points.

### 5.1. Review

1) The general consensus of church history prior to the twentieth century has been that a person who caused his own divorce after his conversion through marital unfaithfulness is excluded from serving as an elder.

2) The Old Testament law excluded from the priesthood men who married divorced women, which almost certainly means it also excluded men who were themselves divorced (Lev 21:1–15). Ensuring that the priests were symbols of holiness took precedence over admitting any particular person to office. However, there are two reasons why this argument is not conclusive. First, this law is not directly transferable to New Testament church office bearers, though it does uphold an important principle. Second, we cannot be sure how strictly this law was followed. The law also prohibited Israelite kings from taking many wives (Deut 17:17), yet we know that it was not applied strictly to the kings of Israel and Judah.

3) The ‘husband of one wife’ qualification in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 requires that an elder have a proven track record of faithfulness to his wife and purity in his treatment of other women. It excludes anyone



with more than one wife (polygamy) and anyone with a dubious recent track record in his relationship with women. It does not exclude a person justifiably divorced and remarried, and it does not exclude someone whose moral failings were prior to conversion (2 Cor 5:17). The above statements seem clear. What remains unclear is whether it absolutely excludes a man who has failed terribly during his earlier walk with Christ, but has subsequently shown the fruits of repentance through many years of faithfulness and purity. It falls short of an absolute prohibition against appointing a wrongfully divorced man, though it does militate against his appointment.

4) The christocentric evidence depends heavily on how we interpret our Lord's teaching on divorce and remarriage. The view presented here is that a person who has divorced and remarried has committed adultery. However, his second marriage is a real marriage, not a permanently adulterous relationship. He is guilty (law), and forgiven (grace). This also militates against appointing a wrongfully divorced man to leadership, but it does not definitively exclude him. We must be wary of applying the Lord's examples of saving grace too carelessly, since only the case of Peter's denials relates to his restoration of a fallen leader. Nevertheless, the general tenor of Christ's words and works show that he is the Saviour of sinners, the Lord of love whose power restores and transforms lives. We must not pay lip service to the transforming power or the restoring love of Jesus Christ.

5) From a missional perspective, two themes were selected. First, the commercialisation of the church is undermining the biblical emphasis on the church as the family of God, with leaders acting as fathers. This trend puts pressure on the church to appoint gifted leaders to grow the church, with the potential pitfall of prioritising gifting over godliness. Second, the family is in a state of crisis in many parts of the world. In

South Africa, fatherless families are the norm. Scripture shows that the restoration of godly families as incubators of godly children is a high priority in God's kingdom.

## 5.2. Recommendation

I began this study persuaded that the eldership requirements in the pastoral epistles definitely exclude Richard (Case 2) and probably exclude Bongani (Case 1). They are forgiven and can serve the Lord faithfully, but they may not hold a governmental leadership office in a church. However, if my exegesis is correct, there is no biblical text which unambiguously and unconditionally prohibits a wrongfully divorced man from holding the office of an elder, provided he has been forgiven and faithful.<sup>11</sup> There are, however, various biblical texts and themes which militate against appointing a wrongfully divorced man to the eldership. The preponderance of evidence urges the church to uphold high standards of moral purity and marital faithfulness for its leaders. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ needs to be counter-cultural in modelling the value that the word of God places on family life. Since elders are to be fathers in the household of God, their track record as husbands and fathers in their own families is of paramount importance.

I propose that a local church should adopt one of two positions on this issue.

1. *The exclusion position.* The church can adopt the position that it will not appoint a wrongfully divorced person to the eldership. This decision can be defended either theologically, based on its

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<sup>11</sup> Certain interpretations of the gospel texts on divorce and the pastoral texts on the husband of one wife would exclude a wrongfully divorced person, but I do not think those interpretations are correct.

interpretation of particular biblical texts, or missionally on the assumption that this is not likely to advance the kingdom of God.

2. *The exception position.* The church can take the view that in general eldership should be reserved for those who are literally ‘the husband of one wife’, but in exceptional cases a man who was unfaithful in the distant past, but has borne the fruit of repentance and proven himself devoted and faithful can be considered for office.

Either of these two positions is biblically and theologically defensible, provided that the second is understood and used as a real *exception* rather than as a licence or a pretext to appoint unfaithful husbands to office in the church.

At first glance, it might appear that these are the only two positions available. To the question of whether a wrongfully divorced man may serve as an elder, the exclusion position answers ‘no’ and the exception position ‘yes’. However, many churches that practise restoration do not do so as the exception position requires. They reappoint men with track records of moral failure not as true exceptions to the biblical norm, but as normal practice. They often do so without taking pains to establish that the candidate has truly repented, changed his thinking and behaviour, made restitution (where possible), received counselling, entered into accountable relationships, and established an extended *new* track record. The exclusion position, rightly applied, seeks true evidence of the transforming power of the Christ in restoring the fallen brother and producing fruit that lasts.

## 6. Practical Application

Now let me return to my two case studies in the light of the above conclusions and recommendations. If a church takes *the exclusion position*, the application is simple. Both Bongani and Richard are permanently excluded from serving as elders. If it adopts *the exception position*, the practical application to the appointment of an elder is critical. I recommend that the leadership apply the following principles in the process of appointing such a person as an elder.

- 1) The candidate for eldership should be well known to those who are to receive his ministry, and the full history of his case should be made known to all. In other words, the leaders should play open cards with their people.
- 2) The exceptional nature of his nomination, given his past, should be explained to the congregation. The biblical basis for his candidacy should be taught to the whole church, a potentially valuable exercise in theological methodology.
- 3) There should be a mechanism for anyone in the congregation who has experience concerning encounters to table them confidentially. (I advocate that the candidate elder must lay down any 'right' to confront his accusers. If his life has been *blameless* in this area for a long time, he should have nothing to fear.)
- 4) Criteria should be established for taking the congregation's perspective seriously, without allowing isolated voices to dominate the decision. The church context should be taken seriously, especially if this decision marks a change of policy or praxis for the local church.

5) The church's ministry context should be taken into account, especially with respect to how the candidate's appointment might impact upon church's witness in the community. If his chequered past is deemed likely to harm the witness of the church, his candidacy should be withdrawn.

6) The candidate's children should be carefully considered, especially their current perspective on the gospel. If they are bitter or likely to resent his return to leadership, then he should rather seek to turn the heart of the father to his children and the hearts of the children to their father.

## Conclusion

This essay sought to evaluate whether a man who is guilty of causing his marriage to fail by committing adultery can later serve as an elder. Does his past failure permanently prevent him from meeting the biblical requirements for eldership, or can he once again meet Paul's 'husband of one wife' criterion?

The weight of biblical evidence strongly militates against appointing to eldership a man who has failed as a husband and father, but that evidence falls short of an absolute, lifelong prohibition. Neither Paul's 'husband of one wife' requirement nor Jesus's teaching about divorce and remarriage has to be applied as a law that trumps the restoring power of God's grace. The power of the gospel can transform a fallen saint into a faithful and fruitful servant of Christ. In exceptional cases, such a person might once again be judged *above reproach* as a candidate for eldership.

A church might legitimately take a conservative view that the weight of biblical evidence makes it wise not to appoint as an elder anyone who has shipwrecked a Christian marriage; this view is defensible. However, it is also defensible for a church to leave the door open to appoint a restored and transformed sinner under truly exceptional circumstances, and after applying a transparent and thoughtful process.

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