

THE SPRINGFIELDER

Vol. XXIII

December, 1959

No. 5 (Special Issue)

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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"Married Only Once"

The Translation and Interpretation of *Mias Gynaikos Andra* in I Timothy 3:2 (I Timothy 3:12; 5:9; Titus 1:6).

LORMAN M. PETERSEN

IT IS the considered opinion of this writer that the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament is, as a whole, an outstanding work in accuracy, modern expression, and readability. However, there is one translation, or interpretation, in RSV-NT which should be changed because it casts a shadow on what is otherwise a very acceptable modern version, at least of the New Testament. This is the translation "married only once" in I Tim. 3:2 for overseers, in I Tim. 3:12 for deacons, I Tim. 5:9 for church widows, and again for presbyters in Titus 1:6. This translation limits the New Testament clergy and deacons to a single marriage regardless of the circumstances. Recently we read of a deacon who wished to resign his position because he, a widower, had remarried before he read the RSV rendition of I Tim. 3:12.

However, lest the reader become ultra-critical of this best of the modern versions, he should be reminded that not all the members of the RSV committee wanted this reading in the text, that the old reading is in the footnote, and above all, RSV did not originate this translation in the first place. It finds its source in the writings of the early Church Fathers, some of whom were quite respectable, especially in ascetic-minded Tertullian, who in the second century championed a quasi-celibate clergy on the basis of this text and others. The history of the passage reveals that translation and interpretation have always been intermixed. The various interpretations and translations and applications of this text belie the absolute clarity of the words, even in context. This is perhaps why a study of the passage at this time may be worthwhile, especially since the RSV committee is contemplating a revision in 1962.

1. The Various Interpretations offered in the History of the Church.

1. *The Pastor Must be a Married Man.* The view has been put forth that this passage teaches that a bishop or pastor *must* be married.¹ The thought is that a man at the head of an ancient household would have experience in leadership (Cp. Verses 4 and

5), that this would enhance the idea of marriage and family in the community, and thus the bishop would in no way be subject to reproach. This is the opposite extreme of the "married only once" principle which developed later and finally resulted in "no marriage at all". It seems to us that this was not the original purpose of the passage, for it is a negative requirement or prohibition of some kind, rather than an encouragement to marry. The concept *one wife* in no way includes the *necessity* of marriage to qualify for the *episkopee*, unless one would wish to interpolate, "the husband of at least one wife", which would be ridiculous in the early Christian community. Not even Paul offers such encouragement, at least not in his own case, I Cor. 7:7.

One may say, however, that the passage seems to imply that many of the overseers in Paul's day were married. No doubt it was difficult to obtain overseers who were not married, for they were generally older men (they were called *presbyteroi*, literally, "old men") who were heads of households whether they came as converts from paganism or from Judaism. Young men like Timothy and Titus were really innovations in the new church and Paul may have had some difficulty in this regard, I Tim. 4:12. But this is much different from teaching that a pastor must be, or even should be married, on the basis of this text. If one believes that it is better for a pastor to be married than single, it should be for other reasons than those expressed in this passage. Paul is here speaking of the character of the bishop, *if* married.

2. *No Second Marriage After Death of a Pastor's Wife.* One of the oldest and most prevalent interpretations in the history of the church understands the expression *mias gynaikos andra* as excluding from the offices of pastor (and deacon) any man who re-married after the death of his first wife. This is the view represented by RSV's translation "married only once". The applications of this principle varied. Some of the fathers forbade all second marriages, even among the laity. Some ancient fathers and bishops were willing to overlook a second marriage if it had taken place before his baptism, or if the first wife had died before her husband's baptism. Still others would allow a second marriage if it took place before ordination. But for the most part the principle was applied to clergymen who became widowers after ordination. All of this seems queer today, but all these were practices in an atmosphere in

the church which frowned even on marriage itself, a false use of God's gifts and ordinances against which even Paul spoke in his day, I Tim. 4:3, "Forbidding to marry."

This ascetic idea regarding marriage began to take over early in the Church. A passage from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written sometime between 100 and 150 A.D. (it has been dated as early as 97 A.D.), illustrates this: "I asked him again, saying, 'Sir, since you for once endure me, explain this also to me.' 'Say on,' said he. 'If, sir,' said I, 'a wife, or on the other hand a husband die, and the survivor marry, does the one who marries commit sin?' 'He does not sin,' said he, 'but if he remains single he gains for himself more exceeding honour and great glory with the Lord. Preserve therefor purity and holiness, and you shall live to God.'"² Here are the seeds of the teaching: a widower who remarries does not sin, but he is a better Christian if he remains single. How well a text like I Tim. 3:2, getting its impetus from the environment instead of the Scripture, would lend itself to such a view!

A further development of the ascetic principle is stated by Athenagoras, in his *Plea*: "A person should remain as he was born, or be content with one marriage; for the second marriage (*ho deuterogamos*) is only a specious adultery, for 'whosoever puts away his wife and marries another, commits adultery.' For he who deprives himself of his first wife, even though she be dead, is a veiled adulterer, resisting the hand of God."³ This is said of the laity, and naturally, then, of the clergy. The argument was that if laity should not re-marry, then the clergy cannot. It was also reversed: if the clergy do not re-marry, then the laity should not.

The principle of celibacy after a first marriage was taken up in earnest by the Gnostics. Although it was not really a part of Gnosticism at first, some of the great Gnostics made it a part of their teaching as a protest against the increasing secularization of the Church. Among these we find, paradoxically enough, Tatian of *Diatessaron* fame and Marcion, of canonical notoriety. We believe this Gnosticism had its inception already in the first century and no doubt Paul is addressing himself to it (I Tim. 4), but Gnosticism as we know really came into its own in the second century. Its purpose was to raise the ideal of Christian perfection higher than was done even by the Apostles. According to this Gnostic spiritualism,

true Christian life consisted in tearing oneself free from ordinary relations and enjoyments of life. One of the commonest of these, marriage, was therefore deemed a service of the devil. We will recall that the writer to the Hebrews earlier protests against such views: "Marriage is honorable to all and the bed undefiled." (Hebr. 13:4).

In our research into this matter, we found that one man in the second century must be considered the celibate hero. It is not Tertullian, generally given this honor, but Montanus, who lived about 150 A.D. He was a pagan priest, who, when converted to Christianity, became a reactionary. He may be called the father of this celibate view of marriage for the clergy. He claimed apostolic inspiration, teaching that he himself was the Paraclete promised in John 14. His discipline surpassed even that of the New Testament. He prohibited second marriages at first and finally marriage itself. This was his way of reforming the church. He paved the way for many movements since: Novatians, Donatists, Waldensians, the fanatics of the Reformation period, and especially for Rome's celibacy.

The one man, however, who gave this interpretation form and great acceptance was Tertullian, who adopted and refined Montanism. He lived at the end of the second century (died 225) during the age following the early Greek apologists. His views on marriage, especially for the clergy, are extensively set forth in his two treatises *De Monogamia* (concerning monogamy) and *Ad Uxorem* (To His Wife).⁴ Rather than to quote extensively from these writings, we prefer to summarize his views. Tertullian is considered by historians as the real promoter of the married-only-once view for the Christian pastor, and he has been discussed much in connection with the RSV translation of I Tim. 3:2. The point to remember is that he really occupied a middle ground. Had he been an extremist like Montanus, his view perhaps would never have become the accepted view of the second and third century church. Tertullian did not oppose marriage altogether as something inherently evil, nor did he follow those who had no restrictions at all. He simply said that a second marriage was not Christian. His view might popularly be summarized by the words, "Once married for the clergy was more than enough, never a second time." Neve says, "Tertullian was a remarkable anticipation of Roman Catholic theology."⁵

In contending for this absolute singleness of the marriage union, Tertullian pressed every possible consideration into his argument. Examples: 1) Adam had but one spouse, Eve; 2) The Second Adam had only one bride, the Church; 3) Death cannot destroy the marriage union since the soul lives on and this is the real seat of the union; 4) In the Resurrection there will be no marriage, so why now in the Church Militant? 5) In heaven people will recognize each other and who would want to be confronted with two or more wives in that holy place? 6) He admits that I Cor. 7:39 allowed a second marriage after the death of a spouse, but circumvents the Scriptural intent by saying that the first marriage in this case was to a heathen spouse and was not marriage in a Christian sense; 7) He had a real problem with Rom. 7 where Paul plainly says (though it is illustrative of the Law) that a spouse is free to marry after the death of his spouse, but goes around the mountain by appealing to a new revelation of Montanism, namely, that as Christ took away the liberty Moses had given Israel, so now the Paraclete had taken away what Christ and Paul said about marriage. Thus a strange meaning was given the term "bigamy".

It is not difficult to see how I Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6 were real wool for this celibate loom, and even argued that if married once was required of the clergy it should be required of the laity, too, since the rest of the qualifications belonged to the laity. Thus Tertullian contended for what he called the original ideal of marriage, only one spouse, and concluded that second marriages are contrary to the will of Christ, were something next to adultery (*juxta adulterium*). And so a wedge was driven between the clergy and laity which the authorities in the church re-enforced after Tertullian, resulting in no marriage at all for the clergy.⁶

Those who support the married-only-once interpretation, however, should remember that the early church was not unanimous in this view. Theodoret of Asia Minor says he ordained a certain Irenaeus although he had entered a second marriage. And the beloved Jerome especially scored the hypocrisy of the whole matter by saying that men guilty of drunkenness, concubinage, and the grossest of immoralities were welcomed into the priesthood while those who lawfully entered marriage a second time were excluded.

Here are some of his words:

"All sorts of prostitutions, filth, incest, etc., are purged away in the font of Christ. Shall the stains of a wife still inhere, and brothels be preferred to the marriage-bed? Why do you bring to me a wife long since dead from the sepulchre? . . . Let not the Gentiles or the catechumens hear of this, lest after they believe in Christ it prove to their detriment that they had wives and not concubines or harlots."⁷

3. *The Passage Has No Revelancy for Our Day.* A third view of I Tim. 3:2 has been advanced by some scholars (Examples: Alford, Ellicott, Plummer, Wuest) which states that the corruption and vices of the pagan culture surrounding the church in the first century caused the apostle to lay down the rule of absolute monogamy for overseers to provide a check against immorality entering the Early Church, but they say this was only a temporary injunction and has no necessity or revelancy for modern times. These men allow that "married only once" is the true meaning of the text but believe this dictum has no authority in the church of today, that it was something of an interim ethic.

For example, Plummer, answering those who criticized the Church of England for not following the Apostle's direction of "married only once", says: "There is nothing to show that St. Paul is giving rules which are to bind the Church for all time. Those churches, therefore, which, like our own, allow the clergy to marry, and even to marry a second time, after ordination, may rightly claim to have the Apostle on their side."⁸ Suffice it to say, that following such an hermeneutic almost any ethic of Scripture can be set aside, as, for instance, the injunction that women should not be admitted to the clergy.

II. *The Proper Interpretation and Translation.*

Then there is a fourth interpretation which we believe to be the correct one for two general reasons: a) It is based on sound Biblical Hermeneutics (that is, that the Bible is a unit and interprets itself and that the Pastoral Epistles belong to the New Testament Canon); and b) It is the natural interpretation, all things considered. This interpretation is simply this: In keeping with all the

qualifications of the pastor outlined in this chapter, especially "irreproachable" and "good report from those without", this passage teaches that an overseer must be a man of unquestioned morality, and in the area of marriage this means one who is entirely true and faithful to his present wife, that is, one, who being rightfully married, does not in pagan fashion, enter into an immoral relationship or relationships with another woman or women, and thus become a bigamist or a whoremonger or adulterer. Paul says the pastor need not be married, but if he is, and generally he will be, he is to be married to only one wife at a time.

One who supports this view finds himself in good company among the exegetes, and there is much sound argument to support it. Fairbairn, in his famous commentary, says: "This passage restricts the qualification indicated by it to an *existing relationship*, irrespective of the question whether a previous relationship may or may not have existed, which had been dissolved by death."

The following arguments have been put forth throughout the history of the church, both ancient and modern, in support of this interpretation:

- 1) Even our Lord Jesus, in correcting Old Testament abuses, did not set down a restriction of this nature, Matt. 5:32.
- 2) Paul in his earlier writings declares that death dissolved the marriage in order to leave the survivor free to marry lawfully, Rom. 7:1-3. His remarks in I Cor. 7 cannot be made to override such clear texts.
- 3) Nowhere in the Scripture is there a parallel to the interpretation of I Tim. 3:2 which holds that there is a different marriage standard for laity and clergy.
- 4) The laws of the Greeks and Romans at the time do not put a hindrance on a second marriage and no stigma was attached to such action—only this, that a man sometimes was considered a fool if he attached himself to a wife when he could have a concubine.
- 5) It is quite inconceivable that Paul would put forth here

and in second position, such a stringent requirement without any explanation.

- 6) It is also inconceivable that this requirement, if it were meant for the clergy, would be extended to the deaconate and the poor widow.
- 7) It is unlikely that there were so many widowers in Paul's day (different if it would be widows) that such a requirement would have to be set down for the clergy.
- 8) Paul in this same letter opposes those who would forbid eating of meats, and marriage, and he wants the widows to marry, I Tim. 5.

Accordingly, we translate the phrase *literally*, "The overseer must be one wife's husband." But we prefer "husband of one wife," and let it be understood in the light of the Scriptural doctrine of marriage.⁹ This does not mean that this is the only correct way the phrase may be translated. However one translates the words, it will be of necessity hermeneutical, due to the "naked" nature of the phrase. Our previous study of *gynee* and *aneer* indicates that "husband" and "wife" are meant here, but even the translation "husband of one wife" may be misunderstood as "married only once". One is tempted to suggest "married to only one wife at a time"; although it may give the intended sense of the phrase, it is too much of a paraphrase. "One wife's husband" seems to have a connotation which is not so easily misunderstood and is close both to the Greek and the intended sense. "Faithful to one wife" is also in keeping with the sense. Some scholars prefer the absolute literal translation "A man of one woman", choosing to let the reader do his own interpreting.¹⁰

III. Why St. Paul Includes This Qualification in the List of "Musts" for the New Testament Episkopos.

None of this argumentation, however, answers the question why this qualification was necessary in the first place. This question is also important for the application of this passage to the clergy

today; for instance, does it apply to divorced men, either before or after ordination, or before or after entering the seminary?

The answer to this question is, we believe, the extremely lax state of morals prevalent in the Roman and Jewish worlds in which the early church found itself and from which its members came. If the called ones, the church, were to fulfill their calling and come out from them and be separate, (and here we think of all the Pauline warnings in his epistles) the clergy especially would have to be above reproach in regard to a great evil the church was fighting—moral and sexual laxity.

The Apostolic Council legislated strongly against fornication, and fornication here is a broad use of the term covering all the prevalent pagan sexual excesses. There were the temple prostitutes. There was the custom among the Romans to have *heterae* (other women). There were the slave women. Let us remember that the church came from this culture. Think of the Corinthian church. The early Christians could not easily shake off their old customs and vices. There was no established church, no seminary graduates, single or married. It is improbable that in the midst of all this vice, a second marriage for a widower would be singled out as the great moral transgression.

The rest of the Scripture says nothing of this. Some believe that the phrase cannot refer to polygamy because there was little polygamy in Paul's day. We cannot agree fully with this. Chrysostom says: "Paul speaks thus . . . since among the Jews it was lawful to enter into double marriages, and have two wives at the same time." Theodoret on this passage: "Greeks and Jews were wont to be married to two, three or more wives at once. And even now they have commerce with concubines and harlots."¹¹

But Conybeare and Howson include multiple divorce, or "successive polygamy", under the passage: "The true interpretation seems to be as follows: 'In the corrupt facility of divorce allowed by Greek and Roman law, it was very common for man and wife to separate, and marry other parties during the life of one another. Thus a man might have three or four living wives.' We believe it is this kind of *successive polygamy*, rather than the simultaneous

polygamy, which is here spoken of as disqualifying for the presbyterate." (Fairbairn, p. 431).

IV. Does This Passage Apply to Divorce?

Conybeare's statement suggests an application of this passage to divorced clergy. We believe there is little doubt that our passage applies to polygamy, bigamy, concubinage (which was something of an accepted system among the Jews), and fornication, but whether it applies to "successive polygamy" is another matter. Other teachings of Scripture could be involved here, one of which could be the New Testament teaching regarding offense.

After a good deal of thought about the matter, not only while writing this paper, but also in connection with our study of admission of divorced students into our seminary, we do not believe this passage applies directly to divorce either before or after ordination, for the following considerations:

- 1) The Doctrine of the Ministry—which grows out of the Royal Priesthood and makes no more demands of the clergy than of the laity in this regard.
- 2) The Doctrine of Marriage. Scripture does not offer a separate teaching on marriage and divorce for the pastor. Here I believe we have a helpful argument from silence: if there were a special teaching regarding divorce for pastors, it seems the apostle would have specifically and clearly said so.
- 3) The words of the passage cannot be forced to speak against a situation such as "the husband of one wife successively". This is much different from polygamy, bigamy or adultery, all of which have the simultaneous connotation.
- 4) We must bear in mind that in the history of the church this passage was applied to the widower, and this interpretation did not arise until the false celibacy of the early centuries came into the church.

- 5) Even those fathers, like Jerome, who applied the passage to divorce did it in terms of *multiple, excessive divorces*.
- 6) Divorce among seminarians and clergy, before or after ordination, would be covered by the sixth commandment and other qualifications in the list—"above reproach" and "good report from without", not directly by this passage.

V. Why Did R.S.V. Translate "Married Only Once"?

If the RSV translation is the correct one, and one takes Scripture seriously, then a Christian pastor, as we have said, is not allowed a second marriage under any circumstances. This seems to be an odd translation when one realizes that the RSV committee did not *have* to translate it this way (could have been literal, or followed the American Standard Version, the very version being revised) in a culture which does not bat an eye even at multiple divorce and other excesses. Certainly it is not a reactionary translation against our times. Why then this translation?

Authoritative information from the chairman of the RSV committee indicates that the New Testament scholars on the committee placed the reading "married only once" into the text for the reasons generally set forth in Alfred Plummer's exposition of the Pastoral Epistles in *The Expositor's Bible*, pp. 118-129. These reasons may be summarized briefly as follows:

- 1) The translation is reasonable in itself, because second marriages were considered weakness and a double family for the bishop would hinder his work;
- 2) It is in harmony with the context, which calls for self-control and blamelessness, since the bishop must be above and not below the average man;
- 3) It conforms to what Paul says elsewhere about marriage, especially in I Cor. 7;
- 4) The text cannot be directed against polygamy because it was rare in the Roman Empire;

- 5) Emphasis is laid on the converse expression, "wife of one husband" in I Tim. 5:9. If polygamy was rare, certainly there was no polyandry, they say;¹²
- 6) The view agrees with that of leading Christians in the early centuries.

Both reason No. 1 and No. 6 above indicate that the phrase was interpreted and translated in the light of later conditions in the church beyond the first century, which brings up the topic of literary and historical criticism regarding the Pastoral Epistles. The pre-supposition is that Paul did not write these letters. Perhaps they were written later by a Paulinist student. But when? The second century fits the situation best. Then the proposition is reverse: since they were written in the second century (and are therefore not canonical), what in the second century helps one interpret these letters? There was Gnosticism, Montanism, celibacy, etc., and a world full of immoral excesses. There was the prevalent teaching in the church of absolute monogamy for the clergy. This certainly would be reflected in the Pastorals. And this, then, is what the author meant when he wrote *mias gynaikos andra*, and so it should be translated.¹³

We are hoping that the RSV committee will reconsider the translation and exchange footnote and text in the contemplated 1962 edition. The footnote to I Tim. 1:2 "Greek the *husband of one wife*" implies that they believe this is what the Greek really says. The least we could ask is the insertion of a literal translation like "man of one woman".

NOTES

¹ This view is voiced by Lock in his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles in the ICC, pp. 36-38.

² APOSTOLIC FATHERS, Loeb Classical Library, *The Shepherd*, Vol. II, Vision IV, 1-3, p. 85.

³ Quoted from Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, p. 420. He says that *The Shepherd* and Athenagoras "are the earliest extant of the patristics which can be referred to on the present subject."

⁴ See *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, Tertullian, pp. 14-114. His treatises such as "On the Apparel of Women", "On the Veiling of Virgins", "To His Wife", "Chastity", "On Monogamy", "On Modesty", and "On Fasting", are an eye-opener regarding the piety of the church in the early centuries, and give a possible source of some of the ideas and practices among people today.

⁵ J. L. Neve, *HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT*, Vol. I, p. 96.

⁶ Space will not allow a tracing of the later development of the teaching. Suffice it to say that such Fathers as Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Epiphanius, Cyril and Origen supported Tertullian's view in one way or another. Synods like those of Caesarea, Nicea, Ancrya, Laodicea and the *Apostolic Constitution* adopted strong legislation on second marriages.

⁷ Fairbairn, *op. cit.*, p. 426.

⁸ Alfred Plummer, *THE PASTORAL EPISTLES*, *The Expositor's Bible*, pp. 118-129.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 417. Compare Hendriksen, *I-II Timothy and Titus*, 1957; "One cannot excuse an attempt to make a text say what it does not actually say in the original. The original simply says, 'He must be . . . one wife's husband.'" p. 122.

¹⁰ The versions have tried to capture the meaning of the words in various ways: Phillips, "he must be married to one wife only"; Goodspeed, "only once married"; Knox, "faithful to one wife only"; Luther, "eines Weibes Mann"; Berkley, "one wife's husband"; Challoner-Rheims, "married but once"; Wuest, "married only once"; Riverside, "true to one woman"; Arndt-Gingrich, "the husband of only one wife".

¹¹ Fairbairn, *op. cit.*, pp. 418-419.

¹² If we consider our Lord's and the Apostle's clear statements on marriage elsewhere, I Tim. 5:9 cannot be made into a prohibition against second marriages any more than I Tim. 3:2. Paul elsewhere advises the widows to remarry. It cannot be proved that I Tim. 5 refers to an order of widows or deaconesses for which such a qualification was demanded. And if it was a charity roll for needy widows, which is likely, such a prohibition would be unnecessary since she would have a second husband who would care for her. Luke 2:36 (Anna) is no parallel.

¹³ The modern *Interpreter's Bible* concurs in this view: "This study [of the Pastoral Epistles] is frankly based on the theory that the Pastorals, in large part at least, are pseudonymous; that they belong to a later generation than Paul; and that in the main they are to be explained out of the historical context of the second century." pp. 343-344. Excluding concubinage, polygamy, and remarriage after divorce, the conclusion is: "Since the phrase 'married only once' stands absolutely, without qualifying explanation, it would, given persistent trends toward celibacy of the clergy in the ancient church, be understood almost immediately to refer to a second marriage quite as much as to a previous one." (Vol. XI, p. 411).