

Throughout the history of Christianity, there have been many controversies over various doctrines of the faith. The issue of polygamy, that is of men having more than one wife, is one of them.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of Christians believe that polygamy is a sin. There are several common arguments they will make from Scripture to attempt to prove that point. The one commonly encountered has to do with qualifications that Paul gives for elders and deacons. They are found in the books of 1 Timothy and Titus and read as follows.

A bishop {elder} must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach. (1 Timothy 3:2) KJV

Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. (1 Timothy 3:12).

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. (Titus 1:5-6).

From these passages many assume that Paul is directly stating that it is unlawful for elders and deacons of churches to have two or more wives. While some claim that this prohibition exists only for church leaders, most believe that it covers everyone. They come to this conclusion because these passages mention specific moral characteristics that lessers should have. The characteristics such as being vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, and hospitable seem to be qualities that every believer should have. The ability to manage a household well seems to apply to every Christian man who is married and has a family. Therefore, many conclude that Paul is including a man having only one wife as being one of those godly characteristics that every man should have. They extrapolate this to mean that single women should only seek to marry men who have no wife. They likewise believe that Paul is opposed to married women encouraging their husbands to take another wife.

The majority of Christians in the world live in countries whose secular culture instills the belief that monogamy is the only valid form of marriage. Throughout the entire world, the established Christian church is preaching this same belief from a spiritual point of view. That is why believers today, especially those who live in cultures that oppose polygamy, flatly reject it. They look at these passages such as the ones listed above and assume that the Word of God attacks this lifestyle.

For more than fifteen years I made the same assumption. It was only when I was challenged to look at a different point of view that I decided to investigate the matter. I decided to prayerfully study these passages of Scripture to see whether my traditional interpretation of “husband of one wife” was true. I also chose to make use of my knowledge of Biblical Greek, the language of the New Testament. I had studied it as a student at Wheaton College, Illinois, USA for three years. I felt that the Lord would reward me if I had an open mind and heart to receive His truth. The following is the result of my research.

There are three Greek words that Paul used when saying “husband of one wife.” They are **mia gune aner** (in that order). **Mia** is the word which is translated *of one*, **gune** as *wife*, and **aner** as *husband*. In the original text the words only and but one are not found in any relation to these three words. However, these words have been added to many of the English translations that we have today. Here are a few examples.

New International Version

“now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife . . .” (1 Timothy 3:2).

“a deacon must be the husband of but one wife . . .” (1 Timothy 3:12)

Amplified Bible

“Let deacons be the husbands of but one wife . . .” (1 Timothy 3:12)

“[These elders should be] men who are of unquestionable integrity and are irreproachable, the husband of [but] one wife . . .” (Titus 1:6)

Living Bible

“For a pastor must be a good man whose life cannot be spoken against. He must have only one wife . . .” (1 Timothy 3:12)

New American Standard Version

“Let deacons be husbands of only one wife . . .” (1 Timothy 3:12)

It is obvious that these words have been inserted into the English translations for a reason. It is to convey the meaning that the translators merely believed was intended; that elders and deacons must be monogamous. However, as stated before, these additional words are NOT found in the original text.

(It is interesting to note that the majority, if not all, of the translators of these versions came from Western cultures. In the Western world polygamy is portrayed as being an evil thing.)

The next thing that is important to understand is what the original words mean. Since a word can have more than one meaning or interpretation in a language, it is good to look at all the possible definitions. Once that is done, it is necessary to see how the word is used in various contexts. Then one will get a better feel for how a word should be translated in a given situation.

According to Bauer's Greek lexicon, the word **gune** can only mean an adult female or a wife. The word **aner** can only mean an adult male, a generic person (similar to how we say 'God created man on the earth'), or husband. Once again, the context obviously calls for the interpretation to be a husband. However, the word **mia** does have another definition that can be substituted for the one traditionally given in English translations. Let's first look at what all the meanings for **mia** are.

(It must be noted that the word **mia** comes before feminine nouns in Greek. There is another word, **heis**, which means the same exact thing as **mia** but comes before masculine nouns. Nevertheless, to keep it simple, we will refer to that word as **mia** throughout most of this essay).

One translation for the word **mia** is the cardinal number one. (Cardinal numbers are numbers like one, two, or three). A second translation for the word is the ordinal number first. (Ordinal numbers are numbers like first, second, or third). A third possible translation are the words a certain, and a fourth is the singular indefinite article (a or an). Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon says the following about **mia** being translated as an indefinite article. "The numerical force of this word . . . Is so often weakened that it hardly differs from the indefinite pronoun . . . Or from our indefinite article:".

The cardinal number one is a word that is frequently used in any language. Therefore it is no surprise that in the majority of cases in the New Testament the word **mia** is translated that way. This holds true especially since the New Testament frequently speaks of there being only one God and one body of Christ. However, as stated, there are passages of Scripture where one of the other meanings must be the proper translation.

The following verses are good examples of where **mia** has to be translated as first.

In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to the

sepulchre. (Matthew 28:1).

Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:2).

A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject.

There is another word in Greek that is used far more frequently for first. That word is *protos*. In these passages however, the word **mia** means the same exact thing as *protos* does in other places. This provides one example of how a word can have more than one meaning.

Along with that, it is possible to see in other Scriptures how *mia* should be translated as ‘a certain.’

And a certain scribe came, and said unto him Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. (Matthew 8:19).

And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body, and the young men laid hold on him. (Mark 14:51).

And it came to pass, when he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, Lord if thou will, thou canst make me clean (Luke 5:12).

In the English language, it would be cumbersome to use the word one in these places.

Finally, there are places where the indefinite article makes for the best translation. The following verses are examples of these.

And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only . . .” (Matthew 21:19).

And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven . . .” (Revelation 8:13).

And I saw an angel standing in the sun.” (Revelation 19:17).

I am convinced that the indefinite article is the proper translation for **mia**, instead of one, in the 1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6 passages. Therefore, the words **mia gune aner** should be read as husband(s) of a wife and not husband(s) of one wife.

I believe that Paul is only stating that if candidates for deacons and elders have families, they must show evidence that they are managing them well. In order for a man to have a family to manage, it is assumed that he has a wife (or more than one wife). This of course leaves out situations where a man is either widowed, divorced legitimately, or has incurred familial responsibilities through mistakes previously made (for which he has repented). This also does not disqualify a candidate who is single, since Paul himself was single and yet an apostle. According to Scripture, an apostle has even greater authority in the church than deacons and elders.

Paul's statements in 1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6 can also be compared to a man who owns a company that delivers small merchandise to stores. If he cannot provide a vehicle for the employee, he will state that in any employment advertisement he puts out. He will say in it that the applicant must be the owner of a car. In making such a statement he is not claiming that the potential employee must have only one car. He can have two or three, since it only takes one car to make the deliveries. The emphasis then is not on how many cars the applicant owns, only that he has at least one to do the job.

To give further evidence of why **mia** should be translated as an indefinite article instead of one, we can look to the only other place in the New Testament where **mia**, **gune**, and **aner**, come together. (In this passage the word **heis** is used instead of **mia**). This is found in 1 Timothy 5:9.

In this passage we see the words being used in a way opposite that of 1 Timothy 2:2,12 and Titus 1:6. Here the situation deals with widowed wives who had been married to husbands. Paul is listing the requirements for such women who choose to receive assistance from the church. It reads as follows.

“Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man.”

The question we must ask is whether Paul was saying that widowed women had to be monogamous while married, or not. If they weren't, they would have been polyandrous, meaning that they had two or more husbands.

It is obvious that this could not be what he meant since polyandry was never a part of the patriarchal Jewish culture. Why is it that when the words come together in 1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6 the translators insist that Paul is speaking about monogamy, but not here?

Many will say that one is the proper translation for **heis** by claiming that women can not have been married more than once. If this were true there would obviously be discrimination, since in many cases a woman is not at fault for losing a husband at two different times. This can happen fairly easily if there is either a war, a plague, or a great persecution against the church taking place in a particular area.

It makes the most sense to believe that Paul was merely repeating the fact that she had to have had a husband, not only one husband. This would make it possible to translate **heis** in the same way in all the passages where the words (**mia** or **heis**), **gune**, and **aner** come together.

Lastly, in speaking of 1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6, we must address the main problem of translating **mia gune aner**, as husband of one wife and not husband of a wife.

To translate it in the traditional way would mean that many of the faithful men of God in the Old Testament would be considered too sexually immoral to even be deacons. Abraham, who was spoken of as being the father of all who have faith in Christ (Romans 4:12), and was called the friend of God (James 2:23) would not qualify. Moses, who Scripture called the most humble man on the Earth in his time (Numbers 12:3), and was given the responsibility for the people of Israel through the wilderness, would likewise not qualify. David, who God referred to as being a man after His won heart (1 Samuel 13:14), and was chosen to be king over Israel would also be considered too perverted to serve in that office.

Many have said that since this Scripture proves monogamy to be a moral characteristic, a man with more than one wife at the time of receiving Christ must divorce all his wives in order to be saved. They believe that god actually loves divorce in these situations. They claim that the Lord is glorified by seeing women ripped away from their husbands (which makes them adulteresses) and children from one of their parents.

The missionaries who originally brought the gospel to sub-Saharan Africa, where polygamy was regularly practiced, followed this principle. As a result, many women who were sent away had great difficulty in supporting themselves without a husband. Since many were divorced at an older age, they were not able to find other men to love and marry them. In order to support themselves, a good deal of them resorted to the only means they could think of to provide an income, prostitution.

For reasons of common sense, as well as the experience from history, it can be safely assumed that this belief is flawed. Nowhere in the Scriptures do we ever see God trying to break up a family.

Because of the negative impact of the missionaries handling the polygamy issue, many have softened their position while still claiming that polygamy is a sin. Today, many are saying that if a man has more than one wife at the time of his repentance, he should keep the wives he has, but not marry any more.

However, they still feel that he should be banned from becoming a deacon or an elder because of their interpretation of the 1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6 passages.

This too presents a big problem. By holding to this view they proclaim that God can hold a sin against someone long after receiving salvation. (This is assuming, as many do, that polygamy is a sin). As a result of the “sin” committed while being a non-Christian, the believer is considered for the rest of his life as being banned from having the joy of being a caretaker of God’s sheep. It is only if he is “lucky enough” to lose all his wives except one, in one way or another, that he can be a deacon or an elder.

It means that men who are homosexuals, rapists, child molesters, and murderers can all receive salvation, mature as Christians, and eventually become leaders. Someone else who was a polygamist, who did nothing different from what Abraham, Moses, and David did, cannot.

Lastly, there are those who contend that it is not sinful for a man to be polygamous if he is not aspiring to be a leader in the church. They claim that a man with two or more wives will have too many responsibilities at home to adequately take care of God’s people.

For this we need to ask ourselves the following questions. Does a man with two wives and no children automatically have less responsibility at home than a man with one wife and ten children? If a man has a ministry large enough to support a polygamous family with two wives, does he necessarily have less time to minister than does a man with one wife, a small ministry, and a secular job requiring 50 hours of work per week? The answers to both questions is obviously “no.” They demonstrate for us the weakness of this particular position.

Considering all things, it is obvious that God never intended for these passages to be an injunction against polygamy. He likewise never meant these to serve as a prohibition against men of God with more than one wife from serving as leaders in His Church.

The time has come to put aside the traditions of men and to stop letting these keep us from believing what is right. I have made this decision, will you?