

Historical Analysis of the “Husband of One Wife” Eldership Qualification in the *Gospel Advocate*, 1855-1960

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The year is 2023. The Nsawam Road Church of Christ in Accra, Ghana, the largest congregation of the Churches of Christ in Ghana and one of the few with an established eldership, faces an unprecedented situation: an elder has lost his wife, the first such occurrence since elders were first appointed in 1993. This novel circumstance necessitates a consideration of the status of an elder who has become a widower. Is he still qualified to hold office, or must he resign? When the Nsawam Road elders deliberate on this question, they unanimously decide that, since the Bible offers no explicit instruction on the matter, the issue should be put to a congregation-wide referendum. At the conclusion of the vote, the congregation decides to retain the widowed elder in his role. This decision, however, provokes significant controversy. One deacon resigns his position on grounds of conscience, believing that the elder must step down. Some members assert that they no longer regard the man as an elder, while others, fearful of the possible disruptions to congregational unity, urge the widowed elder to resign for the sake of peace. The elder refuses.

Beyond the particulars of this account lies a broader portrait of prevailing attitudes. Many within Churches of Christ today exhibit attitudes suggesting that there is, and always has been, an orthodox Churches of Christ position on what it means for an elder to be the “husband of one wife.” For many, the qualification excludes not only

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single, never-married men but also widowers from the eldership. To dissent from this position and these points is, in the minds of many, tantamount to departing from the orthodox Churches of Christ teaching on the issue. However, an analysis of the interpretations offered by Churches of Christ leaders and/or "editor-bishops" paints a very different picture. This essay reconstructs a narrative of Churches of Christ leaders' interpretations of the qualification by analyzing the *Gospel Advocate* journal from its inception through the period in the 1960s when Churches of Christ identity had largely crystallized.² The rationale for choosing this journal lies in its longstanding status as "the premier platform of influence within Churches of Christ" and its role in reflecting "a mainstream consensus."³

This analysis demonstrates that no unanimity existed in Churches of Christ regarding the "husband of one wife" qualification. Two primary interpretations emerged: (1) the view that the qualification merely forbade polygamy and unnecessary divorces and did not require an elder to be married, and (2) the view that the qualification mandated marriage.⁴ Furthermore, among those who believed the qualification mandated marriage, one group held that widowhood disqualified a working and faithful elder, while another group maintained that widowhood did not disqualify such a man.⁵

One factor contributing to these differing interpretations was that these leaders, as Jaroslav Pelikan observed, were "unconscious victims" of the Christian tradition,⁶ having been theologically shaped by other Christian bodies. Many in Churches of Christ, owing to the Restoration Movement's emphasis on being nothing but New

² John Mark Hicks and Bobby Valentine, *Kingdom Come: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of David Lipscomb and James Harding* (Leafwood Publishers, 2006), 18, note that "a consensus theology" had developed "among Churches of Christ in the 1940-1950s."

³ David L. Little, "Gospel Advocate," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 362.

⁴ There was also the view that the qualification means an elder must be "married once," implying that if widowed, he was not to remarry. However, this seemed to be an outlier.

⁵ All who contributed articles on the issue took for granted that women could not be elders and made no arguments against it. The only articles I could find about women elders in the period under study were C. R. Nichol, "Women Elders," *Gospel Advocate*, April 12, 1928, 342-43.; and James M. Tolle, "Women Elders," *Gospel Advocate*, August 5, 1937, 735, both of which opposed women in the eldership.

⁶ Pelikan quoted in C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (ACU Press, 1988), 4.

Testament Christians and churches⁷ and its insistence on “laying aside all human traditions and restoring the ‘ancient gospel’ and ‘ancient order of things,’”⁸ assume that they are autonomous students of Scripture uninfluenced by Christian history, their own history, or their own contexts. However, the conclusions of Churches of Christ leaders in the *Gospel Advocate* regarding the “husband of one wife” qualification reflect broader interpretive patterns within the “great stream” of the Christian tradition.⁹ This becomes evident in the way some of these leaders appealed to scholars and theologians from other Christian traditions to support their positions.

In reconstructing a narrative to demonstrate this thesis, this discussion is divided into three periods: (1) 1855 to the 1910s, when disagreement existed but did not become heated; (2) 1920 to the 1940s, when the disagreement assumed a more confrontational character; and (3) 1950 to the 1960s, when, despite ongoing disagreement, a form of consensus began to emerge.

1855–1910S: DISAGREEMENT PRESENT BUT NO HEATED DEBATE

The *Gospel Advocate* was founded by Tolbert Fanning in 1855.¹⁰ Although one of Fanning’s explicitly stated purposes for establishing the journal was to examine critically matters related to church cooperations,¹¹ it did not take long for issues concerning the eldership to emerge, given that “Churches in the Restoration Movement have always valued the place of elders.”¹² The first discussion of any topic related to

⁷ Richard T. Hughes and James L. Gorman, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*, 3rd ed. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024), introduction.

⁸ Leonard Allen, *In the Great Stream: Imagining Churches of Christ in the Christian Tradition* (ACU Press, 2021), 19.

⁹ See David G Hunter, “‘A Man of One Wife’: Patristic Interpretations of 1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12, and Titus 1:6 and the Making of Christian Priesthood,” *Annali Di Storia Dell’Esegesi* 32, no. 2 (2015): 333–52.; Ed Glasscock, “‘The Husband of One Wife’ Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, no. 559 (1983): 244–58. I am following Leonard Allen’s use of “the Great Stream” or “the Great Tradition.” See Allen, *In the Great Stream*, 8.

¹⁰ Little, “Gospel Advocate,” 361.

¹¹ Tolbert Fanning, “Co-Operation,” *Gospel Advocate*, October 1855, 110–11.

¹² Dave Bland, “Background, Qualities, and Functions of Elders in the Church,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 2, no. 3 (2023): 23.

the office of elders appeared in 1858. In a five-part series of articles titled "Church Officers," Fanning addressed various issues, such as whether elders were church officers, whether they were synonymous with bishops, and issues regarding the ordination and appointment of elders, among others. Although he did mention the "husband of one wife" qualification in the second installment of the series, dealing with matters of ordination, he offered no interpretation of the qualification, stating only that men were required to possess this and the other qualifications before being consecrated as elders.¹³

The reason Fanning said almost nothing about the qualification is that from the beginning of the periodical through the first two decades of the twentieth century, the major eldership-related issues generating heated discussions, even leading to a fallout between the Lipscomb brothers,¹⁴ were questions such as whether the office of elder ceased with the passing of the apostolic age, whether the role was a work or an office, and whether elders were to be made through election and laying on of hands or were elders by nature, simply because they were old. Consequently, although there was much discussion about the eldership, comparatively little attention was given to their qualifications and duties, so much so that by August 11, 1898, J. H. Baxter of Sherman, Texas, expressed the desire to "hear more about the qualifications and duties of elders and less about the method of ordaining them to work."¹⁵ Thus, in the period from 1855 to 1919, issues related to the "husband of one wife" qualification, though discussed, did not generate heated debate in the *Gospel Advocate*.

The first person to attempt an interpretation of the qualification in the journal was David Lipscomb, who served for forty-six years as editor of the *Gospel Advocate*¹⁶ and was its "most prominent editor."¹⁷ Lipscomb received a request from J.W. Slaughter to explain the first seven verses of 1 Timothy 3. Slaughter felt that without making some allowances regarding some of the qualifications, not a single man in the country would qualify to be an elder. Lipscomb's initial interpretation was that an elder was to be

¹³ Tolbert Fanning, "Church Officers - No. 2," *Gospel Advocate*, November 1858, 321–26.

¹⁴ David Lipscomb, "My Brothers in the Flesh and Elders," *Gospel Advocate*, December 10, 1903, 793.; William Lipscomb, "Response to 'D. L.' on the Eldership," *Gospel Advocate*, February 4, 1904, 66–67.

¹⁵ J. H. Baxter, "Elders--Their Qualifications and Duty," *Gospel Advocate*, August 11, 1898, 511.

¹⁶ Robert E. Hooper, "David Lipscomb (1831-1917)," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 480.

¹⁷ Hicks and Valentine, *Kingdom Come*, 20.

"faithful to one wife."¹⁸ Since he offered no further explanation or context, it appears that at this point, he believed that an elder must be a married man.¹⁹ If this reading is accurate, then, as the following paragraph will demonstrate, Lipscomb changed his position within the space of a year.

In response to another query in which the writer asked whether the qualification meant that an elder "must not have married more than once," Lipscomb asserted that such an interpretation could not possibly be correct because "The Bible everywhere encourages the married state, as the one in which alone men or women can fulfill their true destiny..."²⁰ He further noted that a man whose wife had died does not have a wife. He then proceeded to give his view of the qualification's meaning. To him, it was a prohibition against polygamy, not a mandate to marry. Lipscomb explained that since polygamy was common in Bible times, converts who joined the church sometimes had more than one wife. Because the church did not wish to leave the wives and children without protectors, the church did not abruptly abolish the institution of polygamy "but gradually removed the evil by permitting no one, who had become members, to marry more than one wife, and of prohibiting those, who had more than one, from being regarded as rulers, examples, or chief servants in the congregation of the Lord."²¹ Lipscomb then concluded that the qualification was therefore "an announcement, that a man having more than one wife, was unfit for chief or prominent labor in a congregation."²² He defended this interpretation until he died in 1917. Years later, at the turn of the twentieth century, an aging Lipscomb would respond again to another inquiry: "We believe an unmarried or childless man, if otherwise qualified, may be a bishop or deacon."²³

It is worth noting that Lipscomb acknowledged that some brethren disagreed, holding that the qualification mandated that a man must have a wife and that if an elder lost his

¹⁸ David Lipscomb, "Overseers--Their Characters," *Gospel Advocate*, July 16, 1868, 676–77.

¹⁹ It is also possible that Lipscomb did not believe this. Cf. David Lipscomb, "Query Department," *Gospel Advocate*, September 17, 1908, 601. Glasscock, "'The Husband of One Wife' Requirement in 1 Timothy 3," 249, suggests that this interpretation "emphasizes the character of the man rather than his marital status."

²⁰ David Lipscomb, "The Husband of One Wife," *Gospel Advocate*, March 4, 1869, 205.

²¹ Lipscomb, "The Husband of One Wife," 205.

²² Lipscomb, "The Husband of One Wife," 205.

²³ Lipscomb, "Query Department," 601.

wife, he must give up the work.²⁴ Evidence of this appears in multiple articles defending this opinion or a variation of it within the journal.²⁵ Thus, as early as 1869, fourteen years after the *Gospel Advocate* began, and thirty-seven years after the movements of Campbell and Stone formally united their efforts,²⁶ Churches of Christ held different opinions about what it meant to be the "husband of one wife." More importantly, Lipscomb did not charge those he disagreed with of heresy. Instead, he said only that their position was not his "conviction of the teaching."²⁷ This early disagreement demonstrates that there has never been an orthodox, universally accepted Churches of Christ position regarding the meaning of the qualification. Furthermore, the kindness and grace that Lipscomb extended toward those who disagreed with him generally characterized discussions of this issue in the journal through the first two decades of the twentieth century.

1920-1940S: INTENSIFIED DISAGREEMENT AND HEATED DEBATE

However, by the 1920s, one notices a visible shift not only in the number of articles discussing the "husband of one wife" qualification but also in the attitude toward those who held different views. One historian of this period has noted that, "the periodicals read by the members of the churches of Christ teemed with impassioned debates about a bewildering array of issues. These disputes often turned uncivil, and they frequently ebbed and flowed for decades."²⁸ It cannot be a mere coincidence that this attitudinal shift was congruent with the rising domination and influence of what scholars have termed the Texas or legalistic tradition in Churches of Christ.²⁹ The principal figures in the eldership debate during this period were J.C. McQuiddy and

²⁴ Lipscomb, "The Husband of One Wife," 205. Lipscomb used "elders" and "bishops" synonymously. See David Lipscomb, "Queries," *Gospel Advocate*, April 8, 1885, 210.

²⁵ "A Few Thoughts on Qualification of Elders," *Gospel Advocate*, June 17, 1875, 598–99.; J. M. Barnes, "The Apostolic Church," *Gospel Advocate*, September 8, 1892, 563.

²⁶ Hughes and Gorman, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*, chapter 2.

²⁷ Lipscomb, "The Husband of One Wife," 205

²⁸ David Edwin Harrell Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith* (University of Alabama Press, 2000), 41.

²⁹ D. Newell Williams et al., eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (Chalice Press, 2013), 151–64.

Henry Leo Boles, both of whom served as "editor-bishops" of the *Gospel Advocate* in the late 1910s and early 1920s.³⁰

On August 5, 1920, McQuiddy published an editorial titled "That Creed Again" in response to accusations that Daniel Austen Sommer had leveled against him in the *Octographic Review*. The editorial also clarified an incident in a Denver congregation, involving McQuiddy's appointment of a preacher by the name of John D. Evans, an unmarried man, to the eldership of the congregation, and Sommer's opposition, which McQuiddy claimed was Sommer's attempt at imposing a creed on the Denver congregation.

One of Sommer's accusations was that McQuiddy endorsed the appointment of old bachelors as elders. As has already been demonstrated, this was the very position that David Lipscomb defended until his death. Earlier, there was no charge of heresy by or against those who differed on what the qualification meant; disagreement did not imply apostasy. Yet, by the 1920s, those who held Lipscomb's view were being referred to as the "new digressives."³¹ McQuiddy did not deny his position but rather defended his understanding of the qualification.³²

[Sommer] argues that the Scriptures teach that a man must be a married man in order to be an elder in the church. This I have denied. The Bible nowhere says that a man must be a married man in order to be an elder. It is true that the scriptures say he 'must be the husband of one wife.' The word 'mia,' meaning the same as 'eis,' a cardinal number, one, is used thus as defined by Thayer: 'first, universally, (a) in opposition to many.' *One*, as used in this connection means if a man is married, he must have one wife and not many. If the Holy Spirit had meant that man must be a married man, then he would have said so. But he did say that a man could not have more than one wife at the same time.³³

For McQuiddy, Paul's use of the word "one" indicated restriction against those with many wives, not a mandate to marry. To prove that his interpretation had substantial

³⁰ Little, "Gospel Advocate," 362.

³¹ J. C. McQuiddy implied this in his response to J. L. Hines' article on the issue. See J. C. McQuiddy, "Must an Elder Be a Married Man?," *Gospel Advocate*, January 13, 1921, 47–48.

³² J. C. McQuiddy, "That Creed Again," *Gospel Advocate*, August 5, 1920, 758–59.

³³ McQuiddy, "That Creed Again," 759.

scholarly support, McQuiddy appealed to Matthew Henry, McKnight, Conybeare & Howson, and Ellicott. Then he concluded:

All the authorities that I have examined oppose the idea that man *must be married* in order to be a bishop. If such were the Bible teaching, Paul would not have advised that it was better not to marry, unless he made an exception of those who had the qualifications for Christian elders; for if an elder must be a married man, to advise him not to marry would be to advise him not to engage in a good work. I have no apology to make, neither am I ashamed of the position that 'the husband of one wife' does not mean '*a man must be married*,' provided he has the scriptural qualifications, in order to be a Christian elder.³⁴

No one could misunderstand what McQuiddy meant. Although his interpretation aligned precisely with what Lipscomb believed and defended in the pages of the *Gospel Advocate*, McQuiddy's argument was far more detailed than anything Lipscomb had offered on the matter. Moreover, McQuiddy's use of scholarship from outside the Stone-Campbell Movement served two purposes. First, it demonstrated that his view stood firmly within the broader Christian interpretive tradition and therefore was not something new. Second, and although McQuiddy himself would have likely denied it, it highlighted that interpretations and ideas within Churches of Christ may be traced not only to the New Testament but also to interpretive traditions found in other Christian traditions.

McQuiddy, like most in Churches of Christ, opposed all creeds except the Bible, as his editorial makes clear. And as some have noted, this stance within Churches of Christ often amounted to the belief that "our view of the Bible's teaching is identical to the Bible itself,"³⁵ a view McQuiddy likely held. Thus, by showing that his interpretation of the "husband of one wife" qualification was part of an existing interpretive tradition, McQuiddy revealed himself as an "unconscious victim" of the Christian tradition, theologically shaped by traditions outside his own fellowship. As we shall see, McQuiddy was not the only one.

Two months after McQuiddy's editorial, C.S. Hawkins of Auburntown, Tennessee, evidently responding to the editorial, asked McQuiddy whether it was scriptural to appoint an unmarried man who otherwise possessed the qualifications of an elder. McQuiddy again insisted that the qualification does not require that an elder be married but rather that, if married, he must not have more than one living wife, whether by

³⁴ McQuiddy, "That Creed Again," 759.

³⁵ Allen, *In the Great Stream*, 57.

divorce or by polygamy.³⁶ McQuiddy's response to Hawkins prompted disagreement from H. Leo Boles. Thus, on December 9, 1920, the *Gospel Advocate* published two articles: one by Boles reacting to McQuiddy's answer to Hawkins, and another article by McQuiddy responding to Boles's reaction.

Boles's article, titled "Can An Unmarried Man Be a Scriptural Elder?" advanced three arguments.³⁷ First, he held that the name "elder," not only denotes a man advanced in age but also "implies that he has arrived at the age to be classed among the married men."³⁸ Second, he argued that the nature of the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 indicates that an elder must be the head of a family with Christian children, having been prepared for the role through the experience of fatherhood. Third, he emphasized the express nature of the qualification, considering it as emphatic as the other listed qualifications.

Like McQuiddy in the aforementioned editorial, Boles sought support for his position by appealing to scholars and theologians from other Christian traditions.³⁹ Hence, this anti-denominational preacher,⁴⁰ who, like many within the Churches of Christ, believed that "within the limit of God's revelation there should be a harmonious understanding of His will,"⁴¹ also revealed himself as an "unconscious victim" of the broader Christian tradition. Nevertheless, Boles believed his interpretation of the "husband of one wife" qualification aligned fully with "the will of God as revealed to us through the New Testament" and that one who accepted it would come "to a full knowledge and clear

³⁶ J. C. McQuiddy, "Query Department," *Gospel Advocate*, October 14, 1920, 999.

³⁷ H. Leo Boles, "Can An Unmarried Man Be a Scriptural Elder?," *Gospel Advocate*, December 9, 1920, 1188–89.

³⁸ Boles, "Can An Unmarried Man Be a Scriptural Elder?," 1188.

³⁹ Boles appealed to Adam Clarke, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, and Conybeare and Howson. He also quoted Macknight, who, he claimed was the "only one authority" that dissented from his view.

⁴⁰ Arthur Kay Gardner and John Waddey, eds., *Life and Lessons of H. Leo Boles: Containing a Biographical Sketch of the Author and Seventy of His Sermon Outlines* (Gospel Light Publishing Company, 1987), 38-9.

⁴¹ Gardner and Waddey, *Life and Lessons of H. Leo Boles*, 105.

understanding of what the will of the Lord is."⁴² This posture differed markedly from the more cautious approach David Lipscomb had exhibited in earlier years.

Interestingly, even as Boles presented his case, he made a statement that appears, on its surface, to contradict his overall argument: "I do not say that his wife must be living at the time that he is selected, but the Scriptures do clearly teach that he must be a father and not a polygamist."⁴³ An implication of this statement is that widowhood does not disqualify a working and faithful elder. This contrasts sharply with the position reported in Lipscomb's time, where some claimed that widowhood did disqualify an elder, thereby illustrating that those who believed the qualification required marriage did not agree on how the principle applied in the case of the death of an elder's wife.⁴⁴

However, this implication, that widowhood did not disqualify a working and faithful elder, was hardly the central problem with Boles's statement. Herein lies the problem. If the qualification means an elder must be a married man, as Boles argued, and yet, an elder may still be selected even if his wife has died, then it appears that Boles did not truly believe that an elder must be married. Rather, what he required was that an elder must have been married before, but not necessarily have a living wife at the time of selection. If this is the case, then Boles contradicted his own argument since a man whose wife is dead at the time of selection is not, at that moment in time, a married man. As we shall see, McQuiddy recognized this contradiction and used it against Boles.

⁴² Boles, "Can An Unmarried Man Be a Scriptural Elder?," 1189.

⁴³ Boles, "Can An Unmarried Man Be a Scriptural Elder?," 1188.

⁴⁴ Twenty-first-century Churches of Christ leaders continue to exemplify ongoing disagreement and interpretive difficulty regarding the implications of this interpretation of the "husband of one wife" qualification for the death of an elder's wife. In July 2023, the *Spiritual Sword* periodical published an issue titled "A Handy Guide to the Eldership." Two contributors, while agreeing that the qualification mandates marriage, nevertheless illustrated this divergence in application. Glenn Colley, "Family Qualifications," *The Spiritual Sword* 54, no. 4 (2023): 11, argued that "an elder whose wife dies needs to soon resign, in a gracious manner, from the eldership [since] without his helper, he is not the same man." By contrast, Alan E. Highers, "Questions About the Eldership," *The Spiritual Sword* 54, no. 4 (2023): 37, disagreed, contending that the family qualifications for elders are designed to demonstrate a man's fitness for the office. Accordingly, when an elder's wife dies, the question should be, 'Has he proved himself as a leader by his management and influence in the home?' If the answer is affirmative, Highers concludes, the elder has fulfilled the family responsibilities and is therefore not required to resign even though "the wife is no longer by his side."

McQuiddy responded to Boles's reaction with an article titled, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?", which became his most detailed defense of his interpretation of the "husband of one wife" qualification in the *Gospel Advocate*.⁴⁵ According to McQuiddy, if the answer to the question were affirmative, as Boles maintained, then Boles had "used the wrong passage to prove it" since "The Bible nowhere says an elder must be a married man, and the expression that 'a man must be the husband of one wife' is entirely different and means an entirely different thing."⁴⁶ To demonstrate that the expression does not require marriage, McQuiddy continued:

I have often known churches in employing a preacher to impose the condition that he 'must be a married man,' but I have never yet heard of a church that said he 'must be the husband of one wife,' for the very reason that preachers are not expected to be bigamists, polygamists, or have more than one wife at a time. If you were employing a preacher and it was imperative that he be a married man, would you say that he 'must be the husband of one wife,' or would you say that he 'must be a married man?' I certainly think the Holy Spirit would express himself in the most direct way. Again, if preachers were guilty of having more than one wife or of having many wives at the same time, and the condition were to be imposed that he was to have but one wife, you would certainly say that he must be the husband of one wife... This is just the case as it appears in the New Testament when Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus.⁴⁷

As in his August 5 editorial, and as Boles had done in his reaction, McQuiddy again quoted scholars and theologians from outside Churches of Christ to support his view. He even demonstrated that the scholars Boles had cited did not sustain Boles's position. McQuiddy was therefore suggesting that his own interpretation aligned more closely with the broader Christian tradition than did Boles's interpretation. For men who believed that their interpretations emerged directly from Scripture alone, this observation is quite revealing. Having done this, McQuiddy turned to Boles's contradiction:

Brother Boles also admits that it is not absolutely necessary for an elder to be a married man when he says: 'I do not say that his wife must be living at the time that he is selected, but the Scriptures do clearly teach that he must be a father and not a polygamist.' I am satisfied that the Bible nowhere demands that a man

⁴⁵ J. C. McQuiddy, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?," *Gospel Advocate*, December 9, 1920, 1197–98.

⁴⁶ McQuiddy, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?," 1197.

⁴⁷ McQuiddy, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?," 1197.

must be married in order to be an elder or to perform the duties resting on him as such. Paul could be an apostle and not be a married man. Certainly the apostleship is as important as the eldership.⁴⁸

As McQuiddy observed, Boles could not insist that an elder *must* be a married man while simultaneously claiming that the elder's wife need not be alive at the time of selection. Such a view would make it "not absolutely necessary for an elder to be a married man."

In exposing Boles's inconsistency, McQuiddy gave another historic reason for rejecting the necessity of marriage for the eldership: Paul's own ministry and counsel. He had already appealed to this argument in his August 5 editorial. McQuiddy wondered how Paul, who valued celibacy as an advantage for kingdom work, could then recommend that such an advantage was inapplicable for the office of the eldership. Moreover, how could Paul, who was an apostle performing work at least as important as that of an elder, be qualified for the apostleship while being disqualified for the eldership? McQuiddy could not accept what he viewed as a contradiction, as he himself stated: "I cannot believe it."⁴⁹

McQuiddy concluded with an admonition to Boles and those who shared his view: "Brethren who believe in 'speaking as it were the oracles of God,' should not pervert 'must be the husband of one wife' into the language that 'an elder must be a married man,' for the two are as far apart as truth and error."⁵⁰

While others would respond to McQuiddy's arguments in the intervening years,⁵¹ the analysis of this period (1920 – 1940s) reveals that although the disagreement over the meaning of the "husband of one wife" persisted, it evolved into a more heated and sometimes "uncivil" debate. It also confirms what historians have long understood: although Churches of Christ may claim to be "historyless," untainted by and unshaped in any significant way by the "great stream" of the Christian tradition, and although they frequently assert that their interpretations and ideas arise solely from Scripture, it is

⁴⁸ McQuiddy, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?," 1197.

⁴⁹ McQuiddy, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?," 1197.

⁵⁰ McQuiddy, "Must An Elder Be a Married Man?," 1198.

⁵¹ See J. L. Hines, "The Eldership," *Gospel Advocate*, January 13, 1921, 36.; W. F. Lemmons, "The Elders and Their Qualifications," *Gospel Advocate*, September 13, 1923, 882–83.

historically demonstrable that these interpretations and ideas may be traced not only to the New Testament but also to interpretive traditions found in other Christian traditions.

1950-1960S: ONGOING DISAGREEMENT YET EMERGING CONSENSUS

Even into the 1950s and 1960s, the meaning of the “husband of one wife” qualification continued to be disputed. However, no new arguments were advanced during this period. Also, one begins to detect the emergence of a kind of consensus, albeit in a “shadowy” form.

On July 13, 1950, L.O. Sanderson argued that the qualification required an elder to be a married man, since a bachelor could not be the husband of one wife.⁵² A month later, Willis G. Jernigan, arguing from the Greek as did McQuiddy, disagreed.⁵³ According to Jernigan, the qualification “places emphasis on the number of wives rather than the marriage relationship.”⁵⁴ Thus, while in practice it may be preferable for an elder to be married, the Greek wording does not reflect that conclusion. Instead, it simply forbids polygamy and divorce. In other words, if the elder is a married man, he must not have more than one wife, whether by divorce or by polygamy.

Although unanimity regarding the meaning of the “husband of one wife” qualification was still lacking in this period (1950s – 1960s), it appears that by this time, the view that an elder must be married had gained the allegiance of the majority within Churches of Christ. Thus, R.C. Walker, in an article titled “Elders,” published just over a month after the aforementioned Jernigan article, would note that “Recently there has been an effort to discount the married status of elders.”⁵⁵ What makes this statement indicative of a developing mainstream consensus is that, consistent with Walker’s sentiments, not only did the majority of articles in this period take the position that elders must be married, but also this position provoked little debate within the periodical.

Hence, on July 9, 1959, nine years after Jernigan’s article, Gus Nichols responded to five questions in the “Queries and Answers” section, all of which pertained to the

⁵² L. O. Sanderson, “Family Qualifications of Elders,” *Gospel Advocate*, July 13, 1950, 446–47.

⁵³ Willis G. Jernigan, “A Bishop--Having Children,” *Gospel Advocate*, August 24, 1950, 543.

⁵⁴ Jernigan, “A Bishop--Having Children,” 543.

⁵⁵ R. C. Walker, “Elders,” *Gospel Advocate*, November 16, 1950, 735.

eldership.⁵⁶ Among the questions asked was whether being unmarried rendered a brother unqualified for the office of elder. Nichols answered that "one should be married and be experienced in properly ruling over a family. And if his family be disorderly he is not qualified."⁵⁷ As already noted, unlike the exchanges of the 1920s to 1940s, this position did not generate any significant debate. No one disagreed with Nichols's answer, in contrast to the earlier dispute between Boles and McQuiddy, suggesting that by this time, the view that the "husband of one wife" qualification mandated marriage had likely become a mainstream consensus. However, the fact that such questions were still being asked indicates that the consensus was not complete or unanimously held.

Five months after Gus Nichols's response, E. Claude Gardner also addressed four questions concerning church organization in an article titled "Some Vital Questions."⁵⁸ According to Gardner, although these were not "new questions," the church needed to "be taught frequently on these vital matters."⁵⁹ Notably, while one of the questions dealt with the elder's children, none of these "vital questions" pertained to the elder's marital status. Considering that this issue had generated substantial debate only a few decades earlier (in the 1920s to the 1940s), the fact that it no longer appeared vital in this later period (1950s – 1960s) suggests that many within the Churches of Christ by this time took for granted that a man must be married to serve as an elder.

If the interpretation requiring elders to be married had indeed "won the day" by the 1950s and 1960s, this would explain Jernigan's attempt to remind the Churches of Christ that the interpretation which did not exclude single men from the eldership had historical support not only in the broader Christian tradition but also within the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.⁶⁰ This shift would also explain why some leaders had now moved to discussing the kind of wife that would render a man qualified to serve as an elder.⁶¹ Critically, if this assessment is correct, it aligns with the

⁵⁶ Gus Nichols, "Queries and Answers," *Gospel Advocate*, July 9, 1959, 442–43.

⁵⁷ Nichols, "Queries and Answers," 443.

⁵⁸ E. Claude Gardner, "Some Vital Questions," *Gospel Advocate*, December 10, 1959, 789.

⁵⁹ Gardner, "Some Vital Questions," 789.

⁶⁰ Willis G. Jernigan, "The Husband of One Wife," *Gospel Advocate*, September 25, 1952, 623–24.

⁶¹ Fred E. Dennis, "Elders--Their Qualifications," *Gospel Advocate*, July 8, 1954, 525–26.

observation of historians that by this period, Churches of Christ had reached or were beginning to reach a form of “consensus theology.”⁶²

CONCLUSION

As one pulls back the historical layers to the interpretation of the “husband of one wife” qualification as it unfolded in the *Gospel Advocate*, it becomes evident that no unanimity ever existed within Churches of Christ on this issue. This lack of unanimity was not unique to the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. Rather, it reflected broader interpretive disagreements concerning the eldership within the larger Christian tradition. Even when a degree of consensus appeared to be forming in the 1950s and 1960s, true unanimity was still absent.

Thus, no single interpretation of this qualification can legitimately claim the status of definitive “Church of Christ doctrine.” For us moderns, this historical analysis creates space for fresh imagination about how to move forward as a people committed not only to biblical truth but also to unity. We need to learn from David Lipscomb’s “epistemic humility,” which was rooted in the belief that the qualification included room for different interpretations. Furthermore, the analysis has demonstrated that Churches of Christ have roots in the “great stream” of the Christian tradition, even while consciously rejecting that heritage. Perhaps now is the time to begin recognizing and accepting that the past has “value in clarifying who we are and from whence we have come.”⁶³

⁶² Hicks and Valentine, *Kingdom Come*, 18.; Williams et al., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*, 151.

⁶³ Allen and Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots*, 3.