

Question:

Dear Church leaders,

With due respect and honor, I am very glad to have this chance and start writing to your office concerning this hard issue facing some of our Churches today.

(1) Is it acceptable for an ordained pastor to get married to a divorced or separated woman, a widow or a woman defiled by prostitution?

(2) Can a pastor also receive his ordination secretly without being presented publicly in front of all Church members?

(3) Can a separated woman also be ordained as a pastor without a notice of her husband?

Please I will appreciate to hear more clarification about all these issues and your recommendation will be highly appreciated.

And thanks in advance.

Sincerely in Christ Jesus

Answer:

Dear Xxxxxxx,

In the New Testament church there weren't really any ministers as we have them today. Our current system is an adaptation of Bible principles to the world we have to live in. It is from the Old Testament that we get the principle of using tithe to support full-time paid clergy.

Hebrew priests clearly married. The succession of the High Priest was to be from father to son. Today's system of celibate (sometimes in name only) priests is totally foreign to the Old Testament. In the New Testament, however, Paul seems to suggest there are benefits to unmarried church workers.

Now to the unmarried and widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am....

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he might please the Lord. But the married man is concerned about

the affairs of this world, how he might please his wife-- and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:8, 32-35)

The origin of an unmarried clergy has somewhat less noble origins. The church wanted to prevent its property from being inherited by the priest's sons. And even Paul seemed to suggest that marriage was an important part of the qualifications of a leader.

Now the overseer [bishop, elder, depending on translation] must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. (1 Timothy 3:2, 3)

Some interpret this text to require all elders to be married; others interpret it to prevent women from serving as elders. The clear meaning, however, is that the elder should not be polygamous. Right off we humans want to get very technical, and nail down EXACTLY what that means. Can he divorce and remarry? Can he be separated but not remarried? What if his non-divorced wife has relations with another man?

Paul didn't provide answers for all these ultra-specific questions, so we are left to use the wisdom God promised to provide in James 1:5 to decide how the church should be run. Now let me take your questions one by one:

(1) Is it acceptable for an ordained pastor to get married to a woman who is divorced, separated, widowed or defiled by prostitution?

A widowed woman is always morally allowed to remarry. So long as the pastor involved is not divorcing one woman to take the widow, this is acceptable. If the woman who is divorced or separated has Biblical grounds for that separation, a pastor would be allowed to marry her. In such cases we assume that a former spouse who marries is having relations with his/her new spouse, and thus the “innocent” party is free to remarry.

A woman “defiled” by prostitution could be a different issue, and this may be influenced by the culture in which she lives. If the woman has repented, and has demonstrated her renewal by a period of chastity it might be acceptable for a

minister to marry her. The period of chastity is based on Hosea 3:3, but there is no firm definition of “many days.”

(2) Can a Pastor also receive his ordination secretly without being presented publicly in front of all church members?

It is traditional for an ordination to take place in public. The venue is usually a gathering of the members of a conference, mission, or field. Since the pastor is ordained only once and yet may be reassigned a number of times during his ministry he won't necessarily be ordained before the members of all his congregations. I'm not sure what you mean by “secretly.”

The important thing is that the ordination take place and be witnessed by credible persons. Paul assigns spiritual significance to the service:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. (1 Timothy 4:13, 14)

NOTE: At the time I was subject to the idea that because we called our “laying on of hands” ordination, this is what Paul meant. But the New Testament provides no link between the two, and ordination was not used.

(3) Can a separated woman also be ordained as a pastor without a notice of her husband?

This would be a non-issue in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, since the church does not allow women to be ordained. You may be confused about the exact function taking place. Women are, in some parts of the world, given recognition of their ministry short of ordination.

Again, this issue should be moot since we have no Biblical authorization to ordain anyone.

While we would prefer that our church workers have the support of their spouses, the church has a responsibility to recognize those who are called by the Holy Spirit. We would not allow an unbelieving spouse to stand in the way of a minister's ordination, for that would be allowing Satan to hinder the work of the church. I may be reading too much into your question, but it sounds like the husband in question may be seeking power over his estranged wife that God

has not granted him.

I get the impression that you feel some things have been done improperly in your area, possibly even in your local church. If you still feel this way, you should bring up your concerns first to the person you think has erred. This is the principle for resolving differences in the church taught by Jesus in Matthew 18. If you do not receive a satisfactory answer from that, take the matter up with this person's immediate supervisor. If it is a conference officer, that would be the president of the conference. If it is a conference president that would be the union president.

Power in the church derives from the members, and no one person is to impose his or her will on all others. Should the church members disagree with you you should, for the sake of church unity, drop the issue and forget it.

As finite human beings we cannot know everything. There may be some issues church leaders are aware of that had an impact on their decisions. And because church workers often deal in confidential matters, they may not be at liberty to explain them to you. I do not say that church leaders never make mistakes, but the church does have structures for dealing with leaders who act improperly or who bring disrepute on the church.

May God bless in this situation, and may all involved come closer to God as they work through it.

Elkanah