

Believing Children

Introduction:

- A. God has provided the church with “everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Peter 1:3).
 1. We have the Scriptures “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).
 2. God has ordained human leadership “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12-13).
 3. We must be prayerful and diligent in our application of Scripture when determining how to implement Biblical leadership in our local congregations.
 - a. We must strive to “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).
 - b. We must be wise—which includes being “open to reason” (Greek: *eupaites*), James 3:17—when considering the Biblical material and our real-life circumstances.
 - c. We must be honest about what we know and do not know for certain, and “up front” about the subjective nature of our understanding when such is the case.
 - d. We must appeal to the leading of the Holy Spirit and sound spiritual judgment when more than one valid application of the Scriptures presents itself.
- B. This lesson will focus on the parental qualifications of elders. Our understanding of the expectations for an elder’s family will differ depending upon the interpretive approach taken.
- C. “Elders” are mentioned on several occasions prior to the writing of 1 Timothy and Titus.
 1. The first NT reference to elders in the church was in Jerusalem in Acts 11:29-30. This was about AD 45.
 2. Probable date for of the book of James was AD 47–50. This would make James 5:13-16 the second reference to the office of elder.
 3. The first mention of *appointing* elders took place in about AD 47 when Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in all the churches they had planted in the first missionary journey (Acts 14:21-23).
 4. The mention of spiritual leaders “who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13) is believed to refer primarily to elders. This would have been about AD 51–53.
 5. In the late 50s AD, Paul visited the elders in Ephesus on his trip to Jerusalem.
- D. 1 Timothy and Titus are usually dated about AD 63.
 1. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to minister to the church there (1 Timothy 1:3).
 - a. Paul gave Timothy the qualifications of elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7) after there were already elders in Ephesus. Why?
 - i. Perhaps people were challenging the eldership. Paul wanted to have a written record of the qualifications to help Timothy stabilize the church.
 - ii. Possible that more elders were needed in Ephesus and so a consistent set of qualifications was called for.
 - iii. Holy Spirit saw the need to have unity among the churches in the choosing of elders.
 2. Titus was to appoint elders in Crete (Titus 1:5-9) where there were none before.
 - a. Qualifications very similar to those given to Timothy—with slight differences in wording—were given by Paul to Titus.
 3. Alternatively, 1 Timothy and Titus may have been written earlier, about AD 55-56.

- a. In this case, the instructions to Timothy may have been used for the selection of the first elders in Ephesus.
- b. For an argument in favor of the earlier date for these letters, see Andy Fleming's *New Testament Paradigm for Ministry and Ministry Roles*.
4. According to either scenario, the two letters containing qualifications for elders were written within a short time of each other.
- E. Some preliminary thoughts about the qualifications of elders
 1. Each qualification is an important quality to be exemplified in the life of an elder or elder candidate.
 2. A number of the qualifications are somewhat subjective. We must guard against being unreasonable in our evaluation of them.
 - a. "Self-controlled" – How do you define this precisely? What is the standard of measurement?
 - b. "A good reputation among outsiders" – What if he has a "bad reputation" with some? A few? One? How do we define this?
 3. If individual requirements are pressed too far, we can reduce these qualifications to a rigid checklist, even disqualifying men whom God would not.
 4. Taken together, the qualifications create a general portrait of the character of a godly elder with enough specifics given to indicate the overall character required of the man.
 5. The goal of Paul's instructions about elders was to ensure the selection of qualified spiritual leaders for the churches.

"A man whose children believe..."

- A. Two verses deal with family qualifications of elders
 1. 1 Timothy 3:4-5 – "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)"
 2. Titus 1:6 – "An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient."
- B. The controversy surrounds the interpretation of Titus 1:6 and the definition of the Greek word *pistos*, translated "believe."
 1. *Pistos* is used 67 times in the New Testament.
 - a. 57 times *pistos* is translated by the word "trustworthy" or its equivalent.
 - b. 10 times *pistos* is translated as "believing", "believe" or "believer."
 - c. In 1 and 2 Timothy *pistos* occurs 14 times.
 - i. Eight times it is translated "faithful," "reliable" or "dutiful" (1 Timothy 1:12, 1:15, 3:1, 3:11, 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:2, 2:11, 2:13).
 - ii. Six times it is used in the sense of "believing", "believer", etc. (1 Timothy 4:3, 4:10, 4:12, 5:16, 6:2).
 - iii. Context determines the meaning.
 - d. In Titus, *pistos* is used three times, two of which are indisputably in the sense of "trustworthy" or "reliable" (Titus 1:9, 3:8). The third is the passage in question (Titus 1:6).
- C. There are three plausible interpretations of Paul's meaning in Titus 1:6.
 1. We will consider each view in turn, the implications for the selection of elders, and some potential difficulties related to each interpretation.

First Possibility:

- A. *Pistos* describes a child who has made Jesus Lord of his/her life, repented of sins, and been baptized into Christ.
 - 1. The word *pistos* is used of “believers” (= Christians) in this sense a number of times in the New Testament (Acts 10:45, 16:1; 2 Corinthians 6:15; 1 Timothy 4:3, 4:12, 5:16, 6:2—note that four instances are in the pastoral epistles of Paul).
- B. If this interpretation is adopted, it means that the children of the prospective elder must be baptized believers.
- C. There are several implications if one takes this view:
 - 1. Paul wants a man who has fully demonstrated his ability to spiritually influence his family.
 - 2. He is an older man by the fact that his children are old enough to be Christians.
 - 3. The man is “bullet proof” when it comes to demonstrating his spiritual leadership in the home (at least as long as his kids stay faithful).
 - 4. At issue is whether or not the man can demonstrate his ability to bring his children up in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). A man who has influenced his children to become Christians demonstrates beyond question that he can do so.
- D. There are challenges if this interpretation is accepted:
 - 1. Paul does not include this qualification in the list he sends to Timothy. Does it make sense that men could serve as elders in Ephesus who would not have qualified to be elders in Crete?
 - 2. Conversion is a supernatural act of God, not simply of good parenting (John 1:12-13). Can even the best Christian fathers guarantee their children will believe?
 - 3. Questions arise as to when this qualification is fully met.
 - a. Often children of spiritual parents are baptized at an early age (12 or 13 years), at which point their faith has probably not been tested in a significant way. Is baptism the goal or having a child who is a disciple of Jesus?
 - b. One could become an elder when his child is baptized at 12 years old only to have to resign several years later if the child were to leave the Lord in the high school or college years.
 - c. Must one or all of an elder’s children be baptized before he is qualified to serve?
 - i. Grammatically, he would have “believing children” if only one child is a Christian.
 - ii. What about elders who have more children after being appointed?
 - 4. Potential danger: Shifting the emphasis and scrutiny from the spiritual character of the man to that of his children as the overriding criterion for selection.

Second Possibility:

- A. *Pistos* in this context indicates a child who believes in God and Jesus in contrast to a child who does not believe in God or Jesus.
 - 1. Matthew 18:1-6 refers to little ones (young children) “who believe in me.”
 - 2. This child may have a “childlike faith” that responds to God in an age-appropriate way.
 - 3. This child has an obvious spiritual bent which reflects on the parent’s heart.
- B. If this meaning is adopted, the qualification in question says that a child needs only to have an “age-appropriate” faith in God.
- C. There are several implications if this interpretation is adopted:
 - 1. A prospective elder need only have children that have an age-appropriate faith. Therefore the age is not the issue; the issue is whether one can be confident that the child is a

believing child and will in all likelihood become a Christian when he/she is old enough. Therefore a prospective elder may have a child who has not yet become a Christian, but the child does show every sign of becoming one at the appropriate age and level of maturity.

2. What is at issue is whether the father has demonstrated the ability to raise his child in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). He demonstrates this ability by influencing the proper age-appropriate spirituality in his child.
 3. The quality at issue here is whether a man can exert spiritual influence on his family as he will most certainly need to do in the church.
- D. There are challenges if this interpretation is accepted:
1. “Age-appropriate” faith could be interpreted many ways. A child of 3 years could arguably have an age-appropriate faith for a 3-year-old, but it may not be an accurate indicator of the elder’s character.
 2. A man could feasibly serve as an elder until his child reaches the age of accountability. If the child eventually does not become a Christian, there is the possibility he would have to resign.
 3. Begs many questions about what sort of faith is appropriate at various ages.

Third Possibility

- A. *Pistos*, translated “believe” in Titus 1:6, means “faithful” in a general sense.
1. An elder’s children are to be “faithful” the same sense that the two servants of Matthew 25:21, 23 were “faithful.” They were trustworthy, reliable, obedient and respectful *as servants* to their master. The term was not used in relation to faith in God or being faithful to God.
 2. Used in this sense, the children of an elder would be trustworthy, reliable, obedient and respectful to their father. They are faithful *as children* to their father.
 3. This would parallel Paul’s elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:4: “his children obey him with proper respect.”
 4. Three verses later Paul refers to the “faithful word”—meaning that the word is reliable and trustworthy.
 5. This is the most common use of *pistos* in the New Testament.
- B. If this is the meaning, the qualification in question would mean that anyone who would serve as an elder must be the type of man who is raising children that demonstrate proper respect and obedience toward their father.
1. The contrast in Titus is not between “believing” and “unbelieving” children, but between “faithful, dutiful” children and “wild and disobedient” children.
 2. A “faithful” child is one who is obedient and respectful to his/her father.
 3. The parallel passage in 1 Timothy 3:4 states that the prospective elder must “see that his children obey him with proper respect.” Since this is the clearer passage, it should help us to interpret the passage that contains some ambiguity.
 4. The man whose children are “wild and disobedient” (Titus 1:6) would not be qualified to serve as an overseer and shepherd for the church.
- C. There are several implications if this interpretation is accepted:
1. Paul wants a man who has proven by his family example that he is capable of inspiring and developing respect for authority.
 2. Paul wants a man whose life is respected by those who know him best (his family). He will need to have the respect from the church when he serves as an elder. His family is

the litmus test of whether he can inspire and maintain that kind of respect through his daily example with them.

3. This qualification does not bear directly on the question of whether his children have to be (or become) Christians or not. Children who are not Christians may still demonstrate great respect and obedience to their parents.
 4. Does not determine how old the children have to be. They could be quite young (so could the prospective elder). Yet he would have to be old enough—and his children old enough—to confirm that his children indeed respect him and are submissive to him.
 5. Would allow more men to be considered for potential appointment as elders.
- D. There are challenges if this interpretation is accepted:
1. Several standard English Bible translations (NIV, RSV, NASB, etc.) translate this verse as “believing children” or “children who believe.”
 - a. Other translations (KJV, NKJV, WEB, YLT, etc.) translate it as “faithful children” or “steadfast children.”
 - b. The translators were working with the same data we have before us.
 - c. Note: In most denominations, children are considered “believers” from the time they are baptized as infants or “accept Jesus” at a very young age. The significance of this issue for them is minimal compared to groups like ours in which a child is not considered a Christian until responding in faith to the gospel after reaching a certain age of accountability.
 2. None of an elder’s children would have to necessarily be Christians as long as they are obedient and respectful to him.
 3. This would represent a different understanding of this verse than was previously taught and practiced in our congregation.

Conclusion:

1. After weighing the merits of each of these views, the Boston church elders find the third possibility above to offer the most reasonable explanation for the qualification at hand. That is, we believe the primary focus of the requirement for “believing children” is that the man’s family must adequately demonstrate his ability to raise responsible, respectable children.
2. Keeping in mind *all* the qualifications as indicators of the overall character of the type of men we would consider to serve as elders, we find it best to consider the family situation of each elder candidate case by case. It would be a clear indication of his spiritual leadership if all his children are adults and living as strong, proven disciples—but this would not be a hard-line requirement.
3. In some cases, it may not be best for an otherwise-qualified man to become (or remain) an elder if his children are not Christians. Further, since this represents a shift in our traditional approach to these verses, it is possible that the conscience of an otherwise-qualified man would not permit him to become (or remain) an elder if his children are not Christians. Each would be considered on a case-by-case basis.
4. In summary, our primary approach to this qualification will be to consider whether the candidate’s family adequately shows his ability (a) to raise and manage his own household well and (b) to gain the respect of those who know him best—his family—for his life and convictions. This would be a proving ground of his ability to lead and shepherd and manage the church—the family of God.