

What is an Elder in the Church of God?

We have elders – what are they? What do they do?

Acts 20: 17-21, 28 - 31

- Paul is traveling back to Jerusalem (Third Mis. Journey); stops in the coastal town of Miletus
- Calls for the **Elders** from Ephesus (20 miles up the coast)
- Shares with them his passion and effort.
- Vs 28 – give them a charge
 - Keep watch over yourselves
 - Keep watch over the flock, over which God has made you **overseers**
 - Be **shepherds** of the church of God
 - Protect them from without
 - Protect them from within
 - Be on your guard
 - Remember what I did for you for three years
 - Never stopped warning you night and day with tears.

Three words used here for the same function (this passage ties them together):

1. **Elder** (Lit. *Older Man, Presbuteros*, 4245)

- Paul calls for the elders (Vs)
- Apparently a recognized body of Men from the church in Ephesus
- Probably patterned after the Jewish traditions of elders
 - Older men
 - Recognized by the community
 - Respected by the community
 - Kept watch over the community
 - Acted as overseers, judges, arbiters of disputes,
 - Proverbs 31:23, 31
 - Many societies still have elders -
 - The last authority in a city – not allowed to be disobeyed.
- Israel had elders at this time
 - Most occurrences of the word in the NT is in regard to the Jewish elders.
- ~12 times in reference to the NT church function
- Paul calls for the elders – obvious body of men to whom he could pass on his message
- they would take it back and see that it was heard and listened to.

2. **Overseer** (Bishop, *Episcope*, 1985)

- The overseer or Guardian role
 - Keep watch over yourselves
 - Keep watch over the flock
 - (NASB - “Guard”)
 - As a guardian of the city
 - Keeping Watch as a Watchman over the city
 - Hebrews 13:17??
 - Made overseers by the work of the spirit!
 - Paul recognizes spiritual authority in the overseer's role

- It was not just an appointed, functional position.
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- 6 times in reference to the NT leadership
 - 4 times directly in Tim. And Tit. Where Paul tells these men to appoint men to this position.
 - Here in Acts 20
 - Phil 1:1 – Paul address his letter to the saints, the Overseers and the Deacons

3. **Shepherd, Pastor** (*Poimen*, 4166)

- Jesus is the good shepherd – several times used in this way
- NT people understood the role of a shepherd
 - A Guide
 - A protector of the flock
 - One who took care of the sheep.
- 2 times directly attached to a leadership function in NT
 - Here in Acts 20:
 - Eph 4:11
 - Pastor-Teachers – a gift to the church.
 -
- I Peter 2:25 – Jesus is described as the Shepherd and Overseer of our soul
 - Peter was an elder
 - Peter is giving honor to Christ as the ultimate Shepherd/Overseer.
 -

The role of the elder is a critical spiritual leadership role in the church.

- Highest qualifications
- Highest expectations
- Elders should be Christ-like older men who are Shepherd/Overseers for the local congregation.

Who were these men? What did they do?

I Tim 3:1- 7, 11

Titus 1: 5-9

Now you know everything there is to know biblically about elders!

I Tim 3:1-7	Titus 1: 5-9
Above Reproach	
** Husband of but one Wife (“one woman man”)	Husband of but one Wife (“one woman man”)
Temperate	Not quick tempered
Self Controlled	Self Controlled, Disciplined
Respectable	Upright
Hospitable	Hospitable

**Able to teach	
Not given to drunkenness	Not given to drunkenness
Not violent but gentle	
Not Quarrelsome	
Not a lover of money	**Not pursuing dishonest gain
** Must Manage his family well; Children obey him with proper respect.	Children believe and not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient
	Loves what is good
	Holy
**Not a recent convert.	Holds firmly to the message; able to refute those who oppose sound doctrine.
Wives must be women worthy of respect, temperate, trustworthy in everything	(No mention of wives)

Several Observations from the above Outline:

1. The lists differ slightly

- in content
 - Titus was not told the elder had to be able to teach, or not be quarrelsome
 - Timothy was not told that the Elder had to be Holy.
 - in the words that are used.
 - Different words for the same “conceptual” thought
 - In the order in which they are presented
- It is clear that Paul did **not** have a defined checklist that he copied from
 - There was no checklist
 - Paul was speaking through the Holy Spirit.
 - Three important things come from this:
 - *It is important that WE do not make a checklist out of them.*
 - There is a strong tendency to do this
 - We love rules:
 - it makes governance and decision making easier
 - It makes life miserable
 - If God wanted a checklist, he certainly know how to make one (OT law)
 - And he could have delivered it to us through Paul
 - An elder checklist would fly in the face of every freedom we have in Christ.
 - The letter kills but the spirit gives life.
 - *The isolated requirements cannot be treated as of less importance*
 - Just because Paul did not tell Titus that a man cannot be quarrelsome
 - Does not mean that Titus should appoint a quarrelsome elder?
 - Timothy should not appoint a man pursuing dishonest gain, even though he does

- not love money and vice versa
- Titus should no more appoint a recent convert than Timothy should appoint older man who has no ability to refute false doctrine.
- The combined list gives us a more complete image of what an elder is.
 - What the Holy Spirit is giving us here is an *image*
 - he is providing two slightly different views of the same man.
 - This was done in the Gospels (4 views of Jesus)
 - Auto accident observed by a lawyer, an insurance salesman, an auto mechanic and a doctor.

How do we apply these observations into something we can do something about we are trying to appoint elders – What should they be like

- I have compiled a combined list of 13 characteristics
 - 4 of them appear to be specific states of being
 - You could clearly answer a “yes or no” question about them.
 - (This could be a partial checklist if you will)
 - Not a recent convert
 - Able to Teach, able to refute sound doctrine
 - The husband of but one wife (one woman man)
 - Children are believers
 - Children not open to the charge of being wild or disobedient
 - Not pursuing dishonest gain.
 - The others are more fuzzy character issues.
 - You could not clearly answer a “yes or no” question about them
 - Above Reproach
 - Temperate, Not quick tempered
 - Hospitable
 - Not given to drunkenness
 - Self Controlled
 - Respectable
 - Not a lover of money
 - Not Quarrelsome
 - Manages his family well
 - Children obey him with proper respect.

So how do we select elders:

- 1) look for men who are strong in the character department
 1. Reliable, proven, unquestioning faith, uncompromising love for God and Jesus
 2. Self controlled, disciplined
 3. Not quarrelsome, one who disputes everything,
 4. not in love with money – gives, lives modestly, frugal,
 5. Hospitable, warm, caring,
- 2) Then look for men who meet the specifics of:
 1. **Earning an honest living**

1. (legal issues, not your opinion about how they make money)
2. **Able to teach -**
 1. Have to hold to the trustworthy message
 2. Have to be able to refute those who have false doctrine
 3. to do this he must be well versed in scripture and able to put it together to
 4. He must be able to teach so that it encourages others to hold to the truth and remain faithful
 5. His teaching should be able to convey this posture and pass it on to others.
3. **Not a recent convert**
 1. There is no number here -
 1. Expectation of believing children classifies it somewhat
 2. Man of obvious wisdom
 3. Man recognized
4. **Wife**
 1. worthy of Respect
 2. Not a malicious talker
 3. Temperate
 4. Trustworthy in everything
 2. Elders Wives must be exemplary as wives and as examples of faith and righteousness.

Question here: Does the insertion of verse 11 in the section on deacons, necessarily refer back to the elders wives – Is there any hint in the language that this is referring only to deacon's wives or to both?

The One Woman Man

“Husband of but one wife” (Lit. “one woman man”)

1. Superficially this seems (in the NIV) to be a very simple and easily understood phrase.
 1. The elder must be a man with one wife

But what does it mean?

- One wife at a time (if he has been married more than once)?
- Only one wife through his life?
- Only one woman through his entire life?
- That his character or nature is that there is and will be only one woman for him?
- Could Paul be addressing Polygamy that was widespread during this time.(not in the church)
- Does the effect of spiritual regeneration in Baptism nullify marriages prior to baptism so that God does not “see” them.
- How about a man who has been divorced or widowed but never remarried?

There is a long history, dating to the earliest extra biblical writers to contemporary theologians on this topic.

A group of teachers in the church got together for two sessions on this topic and the writeup on the conclusions is available if you are interested.

I will try to offer a summary here of the discussion in a brief time we have:

1) **The scriptures do not clearly say that it would be wrong to have a man who has been married more than once be an elder in the church.**

The questions centers around the meaning of the “one woman man” that is used in I Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6. This has been variously understood and practiced since the earliest years of the church. The main debate is whether this is describing the nature/character of the man, the marriage state of the man at the time of his eldership, or his history of marriage.

- The nature/character argument is that what is being described here is that the man is a “one woman man” in his heart; that there has, is and will be only one woman in his lifetime. It does not necessarily mean therefore that he is currently married at the time of his eldership. This argument is often tied into the discussion of the meaning of the “one man woman” (exact same greek construction) in I Tim 5 when Paul is giving instructions about the widows' list in the early church. Here Paul elaborates in such a way that it is much clearer what he meant. Dan Demshar offers a view of this from the Greek and a comparison of the passages in the section “Husband of but one Wife” at the end of this paper.
- The Marriage State argument sets forth that it is the state of marriage that is being discussed here: A man must be in a marriage relationship with one and only one woman. This completely precludes polygamy, of course(which would not have been a question in the church because of Jesus and Paul's other teachings), but requires that if a man is not married (widowed or divorced and not remarried) then he cannot be an elder. This

was not explored in much depth in our discussions.

- The History argument is simply that a man cannot in his lifetime have been married to more than one woman. To have been widowed, divorced and then remarried, excludes the man from the eldership.

With any of the three arguments above, one must also deal with the effect of Baptismal Regeneration and whether marriage prior to baptism is not counted in the marriage history of a man or whether it is “forgotten” by God and thereby not taken into account when a man is held up for eldership. This also has been debated since the earliest days of the church and similarly, following these discussions, there is not a consensus in the teacher's group about this issue.

Kelly Petre has done a superb job of revealing the challenge of unraveling what the early Christians believed about the “one woman man” and the question of baptismal regeneration in two lengthy e-mails (below, “Kelly Petre on the One Woman Man”)

Thus the “practice” of the early Christians, to shed light on what was meant by Paul, is not unequivocal, and cannot absolutely demonstrate that a twice married man cannot serve as an elder.

2) The scriptures do not say that that is acceptable to have a man who has been married more than once be an elder in the church.

While the scriptures do not absolutely preclude a twice married man, it is the consensus of the Teachers group that they also do not condone or indicate in anyway that it is acceptable for a twice married man to serve as an Elder. Although this may seem like a simple antithetical statement to the first point of this paper, we must understand that there is no scriptural refutation for a person who takes the more conservative view from the scriptures that it is unacceptable for a twice married man to serve as an elder.

3) If this is then a disputable matter, how is it best handled in the church?

If the scriptures cannot bring us to a definitive conclusion on this matter, then the issue is arguably a “disputable matter” and therefore must be left to the conscience of the individual with due consideration for all the arguments, so that is is a decision of faith, and not simply personal preference or desire. (Romans 14)

While most of the group felt that this was acceptable, Mike Hammonds provides an argument that Romans 14 does not apply to this issue, because of the nature of the eldership and who serves as an elder cannot be rightly compared to “eating meat sacrificed to idols” and “drinking wine” (See “Mike Hammonds on the Issue of Disputable Matters”, below)

Either way, if no definitive conclusion can be drawn from the scriptures, then the consensus of the teacher group is that there must be thorough teaching to the congregation on this issue so that differing opinions can be accepted and dealt with appropriately.

4) We must deal with God's holiness.

One of the compelling arguments for the more conservative and “safe” path of not allowing a

twice married man to serve, is exactly that we do not understand *why* Paul chose the words he did (presumably by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) and *why* God did not make it much clearer.

A simple argument is that it is clear and that it is hard for us to accept its clarity because we do not understand the nature of God or accept it readily.

- a. David was a warrior: he fought many battles for the Lord's people. He sinned and had a man killed for his own selfish pleasure. There is every indication that David was largely pleasing to God and that his sins were forgiven, but when it came time to build the holy temple for God, he would not allow David to do it because he was a warrior and had blood on his hands.
- b. In the book of Revelation, there is a special place before the throne of God for those who have not defiled themselves with women. The highest office of God's church is held by elders who are permitted to be married, but still there is a holiness in God's presence for those who have not done so for the sake of God's presence.
- c. Hosea was told by God to marry a prostitute. He was obedient and did so. After having a child, his wife left him to go back to prostitution. God told Hosea to go buy her back (even though he had every right to divorce her and marry a reasonable woman. This is largely understood to be an allegory about God's faithfulness in spite of our unfaithfulness.

It is plausible that God has ordained that Elders be the "one-woman man" as much as an allegory for his people as anything else. Admittedly, this is also conjecture, but fits with other images of God's nature.

This argument is not conclusive, but must be considered carefully in the discussion about this issue.

5) **Even if this is permissible, is it best?**

If we come to the conclusion that the scriptures are not specific enough to conclude that a man should not be allowed to serve as an elder because of multiple marriages, a very serious discussion must be engaged about whether, though permissible, it is best.

The eldership is a leadership position. Most of the qualifications, though specific, also are issues that relate to the ability of a man to lead. If numbers of persons are unwilling to follow because of personal beliefs about whether a twice married man is able to be an elder, then, no matter how qualified, it may not be best for that man to be an elder. This must be considered prayerfully and carefully when holding up such a man before the congregation for elder appointment.

A Course of Action

This summary will be presented to the Elders by the teachers group for their consideration. It is our understanding that it is the Elders who will consider these thoughts and with prayer and earnest consideration, will make a decision about how to proceed within this congregation. With it we will recommend the following:

- 1) A conservative and safe approach to this issue is to disallow a twice married man from serving in the eldership.
- 2) The consideration of any man for the eldership should not be driven by need but by scriptural qualification alone.
- 3) If the Elders decide to consider a twice married man as an elder they should offer teaching/explanations about the text in I Tim. 3:2 concerning any such person. The text translates I Tim 3:2 as “husband of but one wife” which on the outset this brother does not possess. There should be Bible studies on this verse as to how the brother can be qualified if it is uncertain of his possession of this requirement. This teaching process should be done in any region where this is individual is, and may be needed in others regions of the church.
- 4) Some of the people will not understand or agree with the interpretation/decision to put the brother in as an elder. They will have to be called to submit to the conscience of the brother (Rom. 14) and to the decision of the eldership on this matter.
- 5) The elders will have to decide whether this will be in the best interest of the Region. On one hand, they might have an elder in that region. But on the other hand, there might be sufficient focus on his qualifications rather than on the strengthening and edification of the church. The elders will have to decide what Paul talks about in I Cor. “all things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial.”
- 6) Any man in this situation should be required to read the arguments set forth in this paper and prayerfully consider for himself whether it is best to serve as an elder from a personal conscience point of view.

“A man whose children believe...”

- 6) 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.”

- 7) 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.
 1. 57 times *pistos* is translated by the word “trustworthy” or its equivalent.
 2. 10 times *pistos* is translated as “believing”, “believe” or “believer.”
 3. In 1 and 2 Timothy *pistos* occurs 14 times.
 1. 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).
 2. Six times it is used in the sense of “believing”, “believer”, etc. (1 Timothy 4:3, 4:10, 4:12, 5:16, 6:2).
 3. Context determines the meaning.
 4. 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).

- 8) 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:

- 2) *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.
 - a. Matthew 18:1-6 refers to little ones (young children) "who believe in me."
 - b. This child may have a "childlike faith" that responds to God in an age-appropriate way.
 - c. This child has an obvious spiritual bent which reflects on the parent's heart.
- 3) If this meaning is adopted, the qualification in question says that a child needs only to have an "age-appropriate" faith in God.
- 4) There are several implications if this interpretation is adopted:
 - a. 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.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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.
- 5) There are challenges if this interpretation is accepted:
 - a. "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.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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.

Historical Note:

In the early church, there are records of unmarried men who were elders. The arguments amount to something like this:

- 1) A man had pledged himself to celibacy and considered himself married to Christ and the church
- 2) He had never been married to anyone else and never intended to marry.
- 3) His family, household and children were the church itself.
- 4) He met the other qualification for elders (not a recent convert, temperate etc.)

This then allowed a Man to be an elder.

This was a rare individual with remarkable qualifications

This was an interpretation by the early church which is not obvious from the scriptures

Such a man might only be a candidate for the eldership in today's church with a very special consideration.

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.