

Qualifications of Elders

Different terms used to denote the leaders of God's people. There are three Greek words used regarding the overseers of God's people. There is the word *presbuterion* or *presbuteros*. From this word we have the English word "elders" and "presbytery" (Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 4:14). "Overseer" and "bishop" are derived from the Greek *episcopos* (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1). From *poimen* we have the English "shepherd" and "pastor" (1 Peter 5:2, 4; Ephesians 4:11). These three Greek words and the resultant six English words all denote the same function and group of men. *Presbuteros* (elders/presbytery) suggests one who is mature in age and spiritual development. *Episcopos* (overseer/bishop) involves ruling ability (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Timothy 3:4; 5:17), and *poimen* (shepherd/pastor) indicates the care and watchfulness these men are to give to the flock, the local church.

The qualification of elders. There are sixteen positive and eight negative qualifications that prospective overseers must meet (as I have them arranged). These requirements are listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. These qualifications are not optional and all of them are required (the word *dei*, "must" means "it is necessary," see 1 Timothy 3:2, 1 Timothy 3:7). We shall at this point list them. Since most of the controversy revolves around "*the husband of one wife*" and "*faithful children*," I shall leave these domestic requirements until last so more detailed treatment can be given to them.

The elder must be a man. Paul wrote, "*This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a good work*" (1 Timothy 3:1). The prospective shepherd must rule well his own house (verse 4, see verse 2, "*husband of one wife*"). The scriptures are plain regarding the leaders of the church being male. The role of women in the church is not that of leadership (1 Timothy 2:8 ff.). The movement in the denominational world and even in some churches of Christ to appoint women to the presbytery is diametrically opposed to the scriptures.

Must desire the office. We read, ". . . if a man desires the office . . ." (1 Timothy 3:1). If a man does not desire the function of eldership, he is not qualified to serve in this capacity. Paul used a different word each time for "*desire*." The first is *oregetai*, which means "stretches forward to." The second "*desire*" in the verse is the Greek *epithumei*, which means, "to set one's heart upon." There is nothing necessarily political in a man seeking to serve as an elder.

He must be blameless (1 Timothy 3:2). The word "*blameless*" (*anepileptos*) does not mean sinless but rather "irreproachable." Some have mistakenly taught that "blameless" means none will bring a charge, even without grounds, against the man. The man's life must be such that others cannot *legitimately* find fault with him. For instance, he does not curse, lie, is not irresolute, and he is not ignorant of God's word (Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 3:9; 1 Corinthians 13:16; 2 Peter 3:18).

Must be vigilant (1 Timothy 3:2). *Nephalios* is translated "**temperate**" in the American Standard. The English words "**vigilant**" and "**temperate**" both convey the idea of *nephalios* in that to be watchful entails to have self-control. The shepherds of the local church must be watchful regarding themselves and the flock they oversee (Hebrews 13:17).

Must be temperate (Titus 1:8). The word here used is *enkrates* and has reference to self-control as such. A lack of self-mastery would suggest the absence of a spiritual statute that is requisite to be a leader of God's people. Besides, much self-control is needed in dealing with the various problematic circumstances that the elder encounters. For example, he must not lose his temper when challenged or irritated.

He must be sober (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8). The overseer must be of a well-balanced and sound mind. His thinking must be clear and lucid to be able to discern and address the many matters that will come before him. The dull minded and mentally indolent have no business being in the function of oversight.

Must be of good behavior (1 Timothy 3:2). Dignified and orderly conduct is what is meant here. A. T. Robertson renders it "seemly, decent conduct" (*Word Pictures*, Vol. 4, pg. 572).

Must be given to hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8). The Greek is literally "*love of strangers*" (*philoxenos*, from *philos*, love, and *xenos*, a stranger). He must be willing to assist others and come to their aid, even those whom he does not personally know. Picture the Good Samaritan.

Must be apt to teach (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9). "**Apt**" (*didaktikos*) means skilled in teaching (*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*). We see why he must be skilled in teaching in the letter from Paul to Titus: "**Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers**" (Titus 1:9). It is sad and inexcusable that there are men in the brotherhood serving as elders who cannot even teach, much less possess, the level of skill required to silence those who are themselves teaching error.

Must be of good report of them which are without (1 Timothy 3:7). Such is a general qualification for all Christians (1 Thessalonians 4:12). Those "without" are non-Christians, those outside of Jesus (Galatians 3:26-27). It is important that the considered man possess the proper life style when seen by the world.

Must not be given to wine (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7). The prospective bishop must have an exemplary life that is without the negative influence of alcohol and intemperance. The American Standard renders *paroinon*, "not quarrelsome over wine" (footnote).

He must not be a striker (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7). The reference is to engaging in physical violence. The persuasion provided by elders must be the word of God, not physical violence (Titus 1:9 ff.).

Must not be greedy of filthy lucre (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7). It appears that certain elders were financially supported in their work (1 Timothy 5:17). It also appears that churches were not stingy in their support; hence, the temptation to serve for money. However, money must not be the motivation (1 Peter 5:2).

Men viewed for the eldership must be patient (1 Timothy 3:3). The Greek word translated "patient" on this occasion is *epieikes*. *Epieikes* means "fitting, suitable, fair, reasonable, kind, mild, equitable and gentle." Such a quality of character is a must in dealing with people in potentially explosive situations.

Must not be a brawler (1 Timothy 3:3). The American Standard has "*not contentious*." Again, in dealing with people, one must not have a contentious spirit or quarrelsome manner. This is not to say, however, that when the circumstances call for controversy that the elder will refuse to contend for the faith (Jude 3).

Must not be covetous (1 Timothy 3:3). The idea is "*no lover of money*" (*aphilarguros*, *philarguros* means money-loving and the alpha negative negates the word, no lover of money). Some suggest the difference in "*not covetous*" and "*not greedy of filthy lucre*" is this qualification deals directly with love of money while "*not covetous*" addresses method.

Must not be a novice (1 Timothy 3:6). "*Novice*" is derived from *neophutos* (from *neos*, new, and *phuo*, to bring forth, produce; hence that which is new in its existence). God's leaders must be mature and experienced men who are immediately capable of doing the great work assigned to them.

He must not be self-willed (Titus 1:7). Shepherds must not be domineering and arrogant (1 Peter 5:3). A self-willed attitude and character will only be unnecessarily abrasive. Such a trait hinders rather than promotes good relationships.

Must not be soon angry (Titus 1:7). All these people-oriented requirements are indicative of the work of elders. A man who is soon to anger will inflame matters and make possible reconciliation impossible. There will be too many combative matters encountered by elders to allow one into the office (function) who is soon to anger.

He must be a lover of good men (Titus 1:8). Some scholars believe Diotrephes was an overbearing elder in the church John desired to visit (3 John 9-10). If so, Diotrephes certainly lacked the trait of having the capacity to appreciate goodness in others.

Must be just (Titus 1:8). The elder must have upright and even judgment toward all men. Equity and fairness must characterize his dealings with all men, both in the body of Christ and regarding those not Christians.

He must be holy (Titus 1:8). Holiness is separation from the world for the purpose of being used in God's service (John 17:17). These foregoing characteristics reflect the man's ability to rule, work with people, and the fact that he is an example of one of God's servants in decorum and life-style.

It will be observed that each of the twenty foregoing requirements must be present prior to the prospective elder's appointment. It is also apparent that each man must possess these traits (not the eldership collectively). These requisites are straightforward and regarding them, there has been relatively little controversy.

However, the two domestic requirements have been characterized by endless controversy among the people of God. I refer to **"the husband of one wife"** and **"the father of faithful children."** At this stage of our study, we shall turn our attention to the two remaining requirements and a treatment thereof.

Must be the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6). The expression **"husband of one wife"** (*andra mias gunaikos*) has prompted no small amount of different views. The language of the New Testament is very precise (1 Corinthians 2:13). The Holy Spirit could have worded this requirement a number of ways. For instance, He could have said, **"the bishop must be married."** This would mean that he is required to be married, but would not have precluded polygyny (more than one wife). He could have said, **"the bishop must not be a polygynist."** This would have forbidden polygyny, but would not have required a marriage state. **"The bishop must have been married only once,"** was another choice. This would prohibit polygyny, but would not have necessarily required a present marriage state. Instead of all these possible constructions, the Spirit wrote, **"the bishop must be the husband of one wife."** This construction requires marriage (present marriage) but forbids polygyny. It is also true that the Greek words used can be translated as a one-woman man.

The question is sometimes raised, "does **'the husband of one wife'** mean that he can never have been previously married?" Some contend that the prospective elder cannot have ever been married before because such would place him in a questionable situation. However, in the case of the death of a mate, the living mate is no longer the "husband" (Romans 7:3). Additionally, the purpose of a divorce as established from God's word is to end the marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1). Hence, it is unreasonable to claim that a divorced man is somehow still married to his first spouse. Therefore, it is equally as absurd to claim that if he marries another woman, then he is not **"the husband of one wife,"** but the husband of two.

The elder must be the father of faithful children (1 Timothy 3:4, Titus 1:6). Out of the twenty-four qualifications, not a single one has had more controversy surrounding it than **"the father of faithful children."** The two areas of controversy involve whether or not the children qualification means more than one child and if the children must be Christians. Allow me to commence our examination by first examining the singular/plural argument.

In the first place, the word used for children is **tekna**. The grammatical information regarding **tekna** is nominative, accusative, or vocative plural (*The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, pg. 399, **teknon** is singular). One cause of confusion among those not conversant with the Greek grammar is when they use such works as *Young's Analytical Concordance*, they see **teknon** listed as the word in 1 Timothy 3:4 and Titus 1:6 (**teknon** is either nominative, accusative, or vocative singular or genitive or ablative plural, see the declension of omicron nouns using ergon in *Beginner's Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 5th Edition, pg. 33-34, by William Hersey Davis). Rather than providing grammatical detail, Young's concordance just presents the nominative singular form of our word. However, the actual word in 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:6 is **tekna**, plural in number. Plurals and singulars are not interchangeable. However, this is not to say that the plural does not include the singular. A determination of the singular application or inclusion when the plural is used is more a matter of interpretation.

In all fairness, there is what is called plurals of class. Plurals of class involve the plural form being used when it can have a singular application, as well as the plural (see *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, 7th Edition, by Dr. Gottlieb Lunemann, pg. 175 and *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, by A. T. Robertson, pg. 408, Hebrews 1:2; 9:8, are given as examples of plurals of class). There are a number of examples that fall under the heading of plural of class. For instance, the children (**tekna**, plural) of a widow are to assist their mother/widow (1 Timothy 5:4). We know that **tekna** in this case includes **teknon** (a single son/grandson) because verse eight mentions a single son or grandson. However, there is not anything in the context of 1 Timothy 3:4 to indicate the presence of the plural of class (the scriptures recognize plurals and singulars, Galatians 3:16, notice "**seed,**" **opermati**, and "**seeds,**" **opermasin**). It must be remembered that plural of class is the exception and not the rule. Just because plural of class occurs in some cases does not mean it can be argued as present when there is no reason for such an assignment.

The argument is advanced that Paul had no other way to have worded this qualification. If the Holy Spirit had said, "**having a faithful child,**" then more than one child would not be permissible." This argument sounds convincing and lends credence to the plural contains the singular; therefore, the elder may have only one child and serve. The problem is the Holy Spirit could have easily worded the requirement so that one child or a plurality would be meant. In fact, the Spirit did precisely this in the case of the domestic requirements for deacons. A prospective deacon may have one child or children and be qualified. Consider the construction of the requirement: "**Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well**" (1 Timothy 3:12). Notice how the Spirit used "**deacons**" (plural) with "**children**" (plural). The plural used with the plural means one or more children are meant. In the case of the elder, though, you have this construction: "**One (singular, dm) that rules well his own house, having his children (plural, dm) in subjection with all gravity**" (1 Timothy 3:4, see verse 1-3 and Titus 1:6). It is evident that Paul wanted the plural in the case of the children understood as more than one child. As far as the reason for requiring more than one child, I can only speculate. I do know that there is by far more

challenge in raising children (addressing the problems they have with each other) than in raising just one child. The elder will be dealing with people (plurality) in the church and often having to address their conflicts and relationship problems. Having raised children (plural) better qualifies him for the task he will be facing.

Having examined the singular/plural controversy, let us now consider "**faithful children**." Does "**faithful**" in Titus 1:6 (parallel to 1 Timothy 3:4-5) mean the children are subject to their father's rule or does it, in addition, mean that the children must be Christians?

It is evident from the wording of 1 Timothy 3:4 ("**One that rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity**") that the qualification has to do with the man's ability to rule. Indeed, elders must be able to rule. Paul presents the domestic rule of elders (their physical families) and their spiritual rule as parallel (1 Timothy 3:4-5).

At the very outset, I would raise the question that if the Holy Spirit had meant to require a prospective (or actual serving elder) elder's children to all be Christians, why did not he simply word it so there could be no doubt about the matter? As we shall see, "faithful" (**pistos**, Titus 1:6) does not inherently mean Christian. Instead of **pistos** (**pista**), Paul could have written **christianos** (Christian) in Titus 1:6 and left no room for discussion. Could it be, then, that the Holy Spirit had something else in mind when he wrote "faithful children" (pista tekna)?

Pistos ("faithful," KJV) is found sixty-six times in the Greek New Testament. Although **pistos** is used in connection with those who believe in God, it has the basic meaning of reliable. Vine comments thusly on the passive and active meaning of **pistos**: "(a) Passive, faithful, to be trusted, reliable, said of God... Active, signifying believing, trusting, relying . . ." (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*) One can readily appreciate how **pistos** is used relative to Christians. Paul addressed the Ephesian letter to the "**faithful (pistos, dm) in Christ Jesus**" (Ephesians 1:1). The saved are here said to be reliable and trusting, they rely and trust in God. As is the case with so many "ambiguous" words, though, the usage in a particular setting determines the full meaning. Paul had been found **pistos** by the Lord (1 Timothy 1:12). Here **pistos** is used of Paul while he was Saul of Tarsus, before he was a Christian (Acts 9; 22; 26). Even before Saul was a Christian, he possessed certain qualities that constituted **pistos**. Saul was trusting in the rule and discipline that he had accepted as a devout Jew. We read of a "faithful" (**pistos**) and "wise" servant, one who was reliable in the charge of taking care of the assigned household (Matthew 24:45). Regarding stewards in general, faithfulness (**pistos**) was required (1 Corinthians 4:2). As noticed, **pistos** can and is used to describe reliability regarding the Christian in his relationship with God and to a number of relationship applications that do not immediately involve being a Christian. Again, the particular usage and context must decide the application of **pistos**.

Most scholars admit that Paul is saying the same thing in Titus 1:6 in writing to Titus concerning this domestic qualification as he had written to Timothy. It is clear that Paul had in mind the subjection of the children to their father's rule when he wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:3-4). In view of **pistos** being "ambiguous" and the context determining the exact application, I submit that Paul had in mind subjection to the father's rule when he wrote to Titus "**faithful children.**" In fact, the converse or opposite in Titus 1:6 is not simply non-Christian but "**riot and unruly.**" Riot (**asotia**) means profligacy and unruly (**anupotaktos**) means not subject to rule (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*). Riot and unruly describe a person who is out of control and in a state of spiritual prodigality, not just a non-Christian.

It is also important that we appreciate the detailed description of 1 Timothy 3:3-4. The house over which the elder exerts the rule is his own house (***tou idiou oikou***). In other words, these are children who are still under his immediate rule, not those who have established their own households (cp. Genesis 2:24). It is also apparent from both texts that all his children under his rule are to be **pistos**. The man rules his house and his children are not out of control. In some families I have encountered the children rule (ever hear of *Nanny 911?*). I have spent time with an "elder" at a congregation who had three children. Two had been baptized but all three were not subject to his rule. This was obvious. He issued orders but they disobeyed and mocked him. Not long after my visit, the church experienced division and the elders were not ruling, or at least two out of the three were not.

We are faced with the challenge of avoiding extreme positions anytime we study the scriptures. Some want to compromise in setting aside qualifications that God has bound. It has been my experience that in the case of elders, others attempt to bind where God never bound. The view held by some requires matters of elders that are beyond their control. Men can teach their children, set a good example, and exercise headship (rule). However, they cannot always be held responsible for any of their children not being Christians, especially those who are out on their own.

Remember the parallel we saw between the domestic and spiritual rule of elders (1 Timothy 3:3-4)? Those who want to bind the children being Christians and claim a man is disqualified if ever he has a child to go astray, will not make a consistent argument regarding the spiritual side of the comparison, the rule in the local church. "Elders cannot be held responsible for a member who falls away, especially after they have done all they can to teach and persuade," they explain and I agree. However, these same people often claim that anytime a child goes astray, the man ceases to be qualified. While parents exert great influence on their children, we must realize children have minds of their own, especially when they go out on their own (see Proverbs 3:1-12 and Proverbs 4:1-13). We tend to forget that children are held responsible which is indicative of their own free moral agency: "**A wise son makes a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother,**" wrote the Wise Writer (Proverbs 10:1). The Law of Moses did not automatically assign failure to parents whose children did not turn out right (Deuteronomy 21:18 ff., see Ezekiel 18:1-13). Godly fathers must rule but they cannot legislate Christianity (each person elects to become a Christian). While this

is the case, most children at home who are of accountable age will probably become Christians (cp. Acts 10:2, Acts 10:44-48; Acts 16:34). Alas, many of these will fall away when they are removed from their father's influence. It is tragic that so much time is spent observing only whether or not the children have been baptized instead of observing the father's rule because they are not exactly the same thing. Men are too often appointed who have children who have been baptized (often the result of their mother's teaching), but they have no ruling ability (cp. Hebrews 13:7, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Peter 5:2-3). As a result of lack of ruling ability (the very thing required in 1 Timothy 3:3-4 and Titus 1:6), insurrections commonly occur in local churches (cp. Titus 1:9-11).

We have noticed the work of elders, the need of qualified elders and the twenty-four requirements placed on them by the Holy Spirit. Godly men should be seeking to achieve this appointment and churches should be seeking out such men (cp. Acts 6:3-6). Scriptural overseers are a must to the completion of the organization of the local church and are a blessing to those who have banded together to serve God as his people (Acts 2:42, Hebrews 10:25). In regards to these qualifications, we must seek the happy medium of not relaxing or binding where God has not relaxed or bound (Joshua 1:7).

A study of Samuel and Eli as fathers is very profitable (1 Samuel 8:3). Eli's sons did not turn out well. Eli was held responsible for the behavior of his sons (1 Samuel 3:13). After a similar fashion, Samuel's sons were a disappointment. However, Samuel continued to serve in his capacity as leader of God's people with God's approval (1 Samuel 8). What was the difference in the circumstances involving Eli and Samuel as fathers? In the case of Eli, we are expressly told, “. . . **and he restrained them not . . .**” (1 Samuel 3:13). However, it is evident that Samuel exonerated himself in regards to his parental duties. Samuel is one of the greatest men mentioned in the Bible, one of the few regarding whom no fault is stated. In the person of Samuel we can see the principle of, “. . . **neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son . . .**” (Ezekiel 18:20). In fact, Ezekiel presents an unquestionably godly father producing an ungodly son (Ezekiel 18:5-13). The ungodly son in no way diminished from the godliness of the father. Some have erroneously used Proverbs 22:6 in an effort to prove that when a child goes astray, the parents are to blame. However, Proverbs 22:6 ("**Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it**") is stating a general truth and not an absolute law (cp. Proverbs 18:22 with Proverbs 21:9). What I am attempting to say is the prospective elder's family must be considered, but he is not to be automatically rejected because "he has a child who has fallen away."

Regarding "the children being at home, under the father's immediate rule," I am not meaning to say that I believe a man whose children are grown and have moved out is disqualified to be appointed or to continue serving. I believe Paul is simply considering the situation of the man whose children are at home under his rule without any design to exclude good men whose children are grown and who have proved their ruling ability. However, if a man has become associated with a local church after his children are grown, this does present a challenge for the local church regarding the man being

appointed to serve in the capacity of an overseer. The church must be able, with some degree of certainty, to decide what kind of ruler the man was when his children were at home.