

Harmonizing Elders' Qualifications; Are Believing Children a Qualification for Elders?

by Ron Sawhill

In recent days there have been a number of papers composed regarding the issue of Elders' qualifications, and I have generally been impressed with the objectiveness and clarity of the studies. I will not attempt to recreate those papers, but will reference them where necessary. My concern is that as a body of believers we must come to an understanding that creates unity and clarity in the process of determining our leaders. This unity cannot be based upon external papers and arguments, but must be based on the clarity and truthfulness of scripture. Our studies and papers can only point the way to finding that unity within the scriptures.

On being conservative

At the outset of the elder selection process in our church, there was sincere disagreement between brothers regarding the "believing children" issue. From the discussions that I was privy to both with individuals and in groups, it was apparent that the body was not united on this issue. One camp believed that the translation in Titus 1:6 was a poor one, and that the reference was not to "believing" children but to children "faithful" to their earthly father. The other camp believed Titus 1:6 to require that the elders' children must be disciples. Those with whom I spoke who were still undecided on the issue told me that they would probably take the more conservative approach and go with the "believing" children stance.

This concerns me greatly, not because we shouldn't be "conservative" with respect to obeying the scriptures, but because I believe disciples are choosing to take a stand on critical issues without really thoroughly thinking and studying the issues through. It should be understood that the goal of interpretation is not to be conservative or liberal, but to understand the meaning of scripture given the context within which it was written. The process for doing this is called exegesis. Exegesis is predicated on answering specific questions about the scriptures being studied. These questions include "who wrote it," "why did they write it," "to whom was it intended," "what did it mean to the recipient," and "how does it apply to us today?"¹

Through careful exegesis, I believe we can know what God intended here, even if we have some question regarding the exact meaning of a single word in the scripture. Similarly, I am convinced that we as a body can be unified on this issue, and in fact must be unified on this very critical leadership issue.

Background of the Letters

The letters of 1 Timothy and Titus are considered to be two of the last three letters written by Paul, the last being 2 Timothy. 1 Timothy is generally believed to have been written in AD 62 or 63, and

¹ A good general reference is "An introduction to Hermeneutics: Understanding and Applying the Bible," J. Robertson McQuilkin.

Titus in 63 to 64. Both letters occurred during or just prior to Paul's final imprisonment, which ended with his death around AD 67.

1 Timothy

To the best of our knowledge, Timothy receives his letter while staying in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Ephesus was a major urban center with a population of around 200,000 people.² This city was in its golden age, attracting people from all around the empire. Paul sends Timothy qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Tim 3:1-13) and concludes these qualifications with an explanation that *“Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim 3:14-15).”* It would appear that Paul was unsure about how long it might be before he could return and continue building the church himself. Instead, he sets down on paper the things that Timothy needs to know so that the church can continue to grow and prosper. There is no specific command given to appoint elders or deacons, but he provides the guidelines for doing so.

It appears that Paul anticipates the need for such appointments and wants to make sure that Timothy has the guidelines he needs to make them. We do know that the church had elders prior to Paul’s capture in Jerusalem around 56 AD.³ It is unclear whether elders needed to be replaced, or if the church had simply grown so much that more elders were needed. The first century church was organized around house churches, which by nature require leadership at a very local level.⁴ Appointing elders may well have been a necessary ongoing process as the church spread. An increasing number of believers should logically require the addition of shepherds to keep the flock well tended. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that Timothy was to appoint such men using the qualifications Paul provided.

Titus

Titus was located on the island of Crete. Tradition holds that he was based out of the Roman capital city of Gortys (Gortyna). Historically, Crete had been fiercely independent. During the Hellenistic period, it was composed of 35 to 40 constantly warring city-states. Though it never succumbed to

² This population number is an estimate agreed upon by most scholars. Paul, Artemis and the Jews in Ephesus; by Rick Strelan. 1996. p. 43. “Strabo called Ephesus ‘the largest trading center in Asia this side of the Taurus’ and later, Philostratus says Ephesus ‘had increased in size beyond all cities of Ionia and Lydia and, having outgrown the land on which it was built, had advanced into the sea.’” (Strelan, p. 140).

³ Paul originally passed through Ephesus at the end of his second missionary journey around AD 52 (Acts 18:18-22). He then returned on his third journey, and stayed for at least two years and three months (AD 53-55). The first three months he spent “arguing persuasively” in the synagogue, and then he had daily discussions at the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus for two years (Acts 19:8-10). Paul leaves Ephesus following a citywide riot, travels to Greece, Macedonia, Troas, and then to Miletus, where he sends for the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17). Here he bids them farewell and gives them a charge to “keep watch over yourselves and the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (acts 20:28).”

⁴ About house churches: “The archaeological evidence of housing in Ephesus, Corinth and other Greek cities would firmly suggest that the size of the groupings was comparatively small – between ten and fifty members.” “Verner says ‘there is considerable evidence to suggest that the Christians of second-century Rome were worshipping in numerous relatively small bodies in private homes.’” “Robinson suggests 30 people comprised a house-church and there were ‘scores of these small primary house church units’ in Ephesus.” (Strelan, p. 16).

Alexander the Great, (a point of great pride among the Cretans), the Romans conquered it in 67 BC, putting an end to the constant intra-island wars. Crete served as an agricultural supply center⁵ and was a strategic shipping port. Cretans were known both as excellent archers and for their manufacture of fine arrows. Much of their historical independence was due to their ability to serve as mercenaries for the various power factions around the Mediterranean, as well as their serving as safe houses for ransom arbitration and bases for piracy.⁶ They were also known for holding frequent and lengthy feasts; in our contemporary language, they had a party culture. This background may explain why Paul is concerned about their “rebelliousness” and their being “liars, evil brutes,” and “lazy gluttons.”

The island is roughly 150 miles across from east to west, and a maximum of 35 miles wide running north to south. Rugged mountains rise up to 8,000 feet above the Mediterranean, making travel across the island difficult in many areas. By the Roman period, only 17 states are known, although evidence suggests a total number of just over 20.⁷ Each state contained anywhere from ten to thirty known settlements, although the archaeology for the Roman period is not well defined. Each of these states had one or more major cities, twenty-two of which were recognized by the Romans as “cities.” Paul reminds Titus, “*the reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you (Titus 1:5).*” It is not certain if this charge refers to formal “cities” or generally to all of the individual little towns. Whether Titus was to appoint elders in 22 cities or 170 towns, we don’t know, but in either case it was a large task.⁸ Paul then proceeds to list the qualifications that Titus is to apply in the elder selection. It is clear from Paul’s directive exactly what Titus was expected to do. Every town was to have elders appointed, and all of these elders were to meet the criteria Paul specified.

Purpose of the letters compared

Timothy received a list of qualifications for elders and deacons so that he would know what to do in case Paul was delayed. Titus received a list of qualifications for elders with the instruction to appoint elders, completing what Paul had left unfinished. Paul was the “master builder” (1 Cor. 3:10) of both sets of churches. Each evangelist he left in charge was provided with a specific set of criteria prepared by Paul, from which they were expected to evaluate, select and appoint elders of God’s church. Neither evangelist had the ability, as one would today, to call the other on the telephone and to compare their list with the other’s list. Each was expected to make appointments based on the set of criteria they received. This has a direct implication for how we must view these scriptures. Since, individually, each text was sufficient for appointing elders in the first century, then, individually, each text should be sufficient to do the same today.

⁵ Agriculture was the primary industry on Crete, and Sanders states “By comparison with agriculture the various industries known from Roman Crete were probably of little importance and produced nearly entirely for local demand.” Roman Crete, by Ian Sanders. 1982. p. 33.

⁶ “Cretans do, however, seem to have ‘delighted in war as much as in banqueting.’” (Hesiod), in: Romans and Crete, by G.W.M. Harrison. 1993. p. 14.

⁷ The reduction in number of states and premier cities was gradual, and the exact number is not certain and may have varied throughout the Roman period. Sanders. pp. 9-13.

⁸ Homer referred to Crete as “Crete of the hundred cities.” p. 268. in: The letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon. William Barclay, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. 1960.

Some have proposed that the two lists be combined to create a robust, all-inclusive listing of qualifications. While this appears to have merit on the surface, we must recognize that this was never Paul's intent when he wrote the letters. **To sum them together violates proper exegesis, which requires that the scriptures be evaluated based upon the intent of the author and the understanding of the recipient. Therefore, we must respect the integrity and independence of each set of qualifications, and consequently, each set of qualifications must be viewed as equally authoritative and complete.**

If each set of qualifications is equally authoritative and complete, but differs in requirements, we have a problem. Scripture clearly states that "*All scripture is God-breathed*" (2 Tim 3:16) and scripture proclaims to us a "*God, who does not lie,*" (Titus 1:2). Therefore, we must find the harmony between these sets of qualifications. And if our interpretation of scripture results in one scripture negating or falsifying another, that interpretation of scripture cannot be valid.

Concept of Harmony

Certain rules apply when harmonizing scripture. Firstly, a passage that is obscure, uncertain in translation or of minor biblical emphasis must not rule over passages that are clearer or more pervasive in the scriptures. Secondly, logical deduction must not be allowed to violate the authority of scripture by negating other clear teachings in scripture, nor should logical deduction be considered inspired, infallible, or authoritative. Logical deduction is a tool for understanding scripture, but it is not a replacement for scripture.

As an example of harmony, in the gospels we are presented with multiple views of the same or similar occurrences, much like a television mystery, where various eyewitnesses present different accounts of an incident. The best way to understand what truly happened is to assemble all of the accounts into one complete picture. This is generally an additive or amalgamating process, quite appropriate to multiple views of identical historical events. But this is not an appropriate model for evaluating these two qualification lists, as has already been pointed out.

Instead, it would appear that there are two possible routes for harmony. The first possibility is harmony by direct correlation, meaning that the two passages are directly equal in specific meaning. If we collect together all the words and review their definitions, we should find that they address the same qualifications. The second possibility is harmony by concept; this means that the two lists could be different, but that the organizing concepts behind the words (character qualities) are consistent. In the end, the products of the two separate qualification lists, the elders themselves, should be found to be equal in family requirements, in age-maturity requirements, and in spiritual character requirements.

Harmony by direct correlation

To evaluate the direct correlation approach, each qualification from one list must be compared with the other list. This appears a bit exhaustive, but it reveals some very interesting things in the scriptures.

Above Reproach - Blameless

The first qualification in both passages relates to blame. In 1 Tim 3:2, Paul tells Timothy that the overseer must be [NIV] “above reproach,” (anepil_mpton), and in Titus 1:6, he tells Titus that an elder must be [NIV] “blameless,” (anegkl_tos); the differences between the two words are slight. The first one means “beyond reproach” or un-blamable,” while the second means un-blamable, irreproachable.” Essentially, these are identical.

The Elder’s Wife

The second qualification in both lists is that the appointee be the husband of one wife. Neither letter identifies specific qualifications of the elder’s wife. Interestingly, characteristics of a Deacon’s wife are discussed in the letter to Timothy. Deacons are not addressed at all in Titus. Neither letter requires that the elder’s wife must be a believer. Surely, this must be a misprint! Could one serve as an elder if his wife has never become a believer, but has chosen to remain with him?⁹ There appears to be nothing in the two qualification lists to prevent him. What if the unbeliever leaves him and he remarries in the Lord? Paul says, “*a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances*” (1 Cor. 7:15).

There is one reference to the apostles and the Lord's brothers having the right "to lead around with them a sister wife" (1 Cor 9:5), which the NIV condenses to "a believing wife." I soundly believe and support that a man who marries should not marry outside the Lord, but the fact is, these passages defining qualifications for elders make no such distinction.

In his instructions about deacons, Paul requires that the deacon's wife be "*worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate, and trustworthy in everything*" (1 Tim 3:11). It must be noted here, that the phrase "trustworthy in everything" is "pistos" in everything" - the same word used in Titus 1:6 describing the "believing" children of an elder. Does this mean that the deacon's wife must be a believer? "Pistos" means: faithful, trustworthy, reliable, believing, sure, true, and unflinching. The English word selection is based primarily upon context. Where the context is unclear, several meanings should be employed to get the full "flavor" of the passage. Logic tells us that it would not make sense to translate pistos as "believing" here, because the resultant meaning would be nonsensical - "believing in everything." A wife who believed in everything would be a hindrance to a man who "*must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience*"(1 Tim 3:9). Translating the passage as "faithful in everything," "reliable in everything," "sure in everything," "true in everything," or "unflinching in everything," all work reasonably and convey the character of the woman in question.

1 Tim 3:11 should also be evaluated within the context of the overall instructions; it would seem strange for Paul to require the deacons to have a believing wife when he does not make that same requirement for the elders who will oversee the deacons. We have therefore, complete harmony between the requirements for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3, and complete harmony with Titus 1 in reference to the elder's wife’s qualifications.

⁹ See 1 Cor. 7:12-16. Paul states, “the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband, otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” NIV.

Identical Words

Many of the qualifications in the two lists are similar, but not worded identically in all cases. The words that are identical in the Greek include: husband of one wife; not given to drunkenness (literally “tarrying at wine”); hospitable (literally “lover of strangers”); not violent; and finally, “self-controlled.” These identical words all match the standard for harmony by direct correlation.

Sensible vs. Self-Controlled

Although the same Greek word is translated “self-control” in the NIV in both passages, it seems a poor translation. The actual meaning is to “be in one’s right mind; think sensibly, be sensible, serious” and it denotes being of sound-mind. By extension, the word therefore means sober-minded or self-controlled.¹⁰ In my opinion, the word’s actual meaning “sensible” is really what was intended, because in the Titus list there is a second word (egkrat_), which specifically means “self-control.” To avoid the obvious repetition, NIV translates egkrat_ as self-disciplined. This seems a poor selection and a very narrow difference. It would make much more sense for Paul to be instructing the evangelists to appoint men who are clear thinkers and who have self-control, rather than men who have self-control and self-discipline.

Related Words

Having identified the words that are exactly duplicated between the two lists, we now need to look at those that are related in subject matter. Let us pick up where we left off with self-control. In Titus 1:8, Paul uses “egkrat_” which means self-control, but in 1 Tim 3:2, he uses “nephalion” which means temperate. While temperate can be taken to refer to drinking, its definition is really much more broad “exercising moderation and self-restraint” (Webster). Considering that Paul later states “not tarrying at wine” which translates as “not given to drunkenness” it would again make sense that the broader definition rather than repetition is intended. If repetition were intended, it would seem more effective to use the identical words, (which Paul does for “blameless” in the Titus list, and which is done many times in the New Testament to make emphasis on a particular topic).¹¹

A second similar word relationship can be found in 1 Tim. 3:3 where Paul says an overseer is to be “not a lover of money” (aphilarguron) and in Titus 1:7 where Paul says an elder is to be “not greedy for material gain” (m_ aischrokerd_).” Again, these are different statements, but they have similar and harmonious meanings, satisfying the criteria for harmony by direct correlation. Less direct connections occur for some of the other terms in the list. These will be addressed individually.

¹⁰ Sources for Greek word definitions include: The Greek New Testament, 4th Rev. Ed. (with dictionary), Eds. Aland et al., 2002; The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament, William D. Mounce, 1993; Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W.E. Vine. 1952.

¹¹ Jesus used repetition for emphasis: (John 3:3 “**Am_n am_n** leg_ soi” **Truly, truly** I say to you); Paul: (Philemon 9-10 “dia t_n agap_n mallon **parakal_** toioutos _n h_s Paulos presbut_s nuni de kai desmios Christou Jesou; **parakal_** se peri tou h_m_n teknou, hon egenn_sa en tois desmois, On_simon...” “yet **I appeal to** you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – **I appeal to** you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains” [NIV]).

Not a Recent Convert

1 Tim. 3:6 requires that the man not be a recent convert (neophyton – new or recently planted), from which our term neophyte is derived, while Titus has no direct analogue. This means that we will need to look for harmony by concept. Three questions must be answered. First, is there a constraint against new converts built into the Titus list? Second, are the reasons behind disqualifying recent converts in 1 Timothy addressed in Titus? Third, does physical age have anything to do with qualifications for elders?

Is there a constraint against new converts built into the Titus list? We do know that for Titus to qualify an elder, he had to be able to *“hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others with sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”* NIV Titus 1:9. So what kind of man was Titus looking for? A man who held firmly to what had been taught and who had enough conviction and understanding to teach and correct others. This would certainly exclude a recent convert. Some period of time would be required for a man to demonstrate his conviction to both hold onto the teachings and to be grounded well enough to teach and correct others. This is clearly a spiritual maturity requirement.

Are the reasons behind disqualifying recent converts in 1 Timothy addressed in Titus? The reason Paul says the overseer should not be a recent convert has to do with the danger of falling into pride and the devil’s judgment. This issue is addressed under the heading of “arrogance” (see next page), which is addressed in Titus as well. Paul then continues in 1 Tim 3:7 saying, [NIV] *“He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.”* Though this is a separate sentence in the English translation, it is actually a continuation of the previous statement in the Greek, and could be rendered like this: *“but also must have a (good, right, proper, fitting, honorable, honest, fine, beautiful) (testimony, witness, evidence, reputation) from the outside, in order that [he will] not fall into (reproach, insult, disgrace, shame) and the devil’s trap.”* By saying “from the outside,” Paul does imply that the elder must conduct his affairs within the community honorably. A recent convert may not be able to have such a reputation. Many of the sins from which we are saved include those involving personal and business relations in the world. It takes repentance, testing and time to develop a solid reputation, something a recent convert might not be able to show. There is no direct reference to reputation in the Titus list, but I believe that it is addressed within the context of the specific personal qualities given Titus to review. This is further discussed under the heading of “respectability.”

Does physical age have anything to do with qualifications for elders? We know that Timothy would be looking for someone who was not a recent convert, but what about the age of the man? In 1 Timothy, the qualifications are for an overseer (episkopos), while in Titus, elder (presbuteros) is the initial term used, followed by overseer. The term “overseer” implies no specific age, while the term “elder” means an older man. This might imply that Timothy was not restricted by an age requirement while Titus was, but this could result in a very different pool of candidates. However, Paul provides some further instructions near the end of his letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 5:17-22 he does indeed use the term “elder” (presbuteros) and instructs Timothy about honoring them, about

payment and about resolving accusations against elders. Is this still in the context of appointing elders? I believe so, because in verse 22 he warns Timothy to “not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” This would seem to suggest that Timothy is to be careful in his selection of elders so that he can minimize the necessity for publicly rebuking those elders who sin. The references to elders in 1 Timothy 5 clarifies Paul’s use of “overseer” in 1 Timothy 3 and directly correlates with the use of elder and overseer in Titus. What the minimum age of these older men should be is not clearly addressed in these passages and will not be addressed in this paper. Suffice it to say, based on the term “elder,” Titus and Timothy were given the same age requirements.

Arrogance

Continuing with 1 Tim. 3:6, it says: “*not recently converted in order that he will not be [swollen with pride or high-minded] (literally “wrapped in smoke”), falling into the Devil’s [condemnation, punishment or verdict].*” The sense of this passage is that Paul is concerned that too young a disciple will begin to think too much of himself, and so end up suffering the same punishment that has been decreed for Satan. The issue here is pride and conceit. In Titus 1:7, Paul instructs that the elder is to be (NIV) “*not overbearing*” (authad_). The Greek word actually means arrogant or self-willed. Comparing the two passages, we can see that in 1 Timothy, Paul addresses the pride issue as being something that is a danger, while in Titus, he identifies the qualification as “not arrogant.” Though constructed differently, the same issue is addressed, which lends credence to the unity of these passages; that they are differently expressed even reinforces the importance of humility in the men appointed.

Gentle, Peaceable

In 1 Tim 3:3, Paul says that the overseer needs to be (NIV) “*gentle, not quarrelsome,*” while in Titus 1:7 he says “*not quick-tempered.*” Three different words are used here: (epiek_) which means “gentle, forbearing, considerate;” (amachon), which means “peaceable, peaceful;” and (m_ orgilon) which means “not angry, not prone to anger, not soon angry.” It is unclear why the NIV translation chooses to use the English negative “gentle, not quarrelsome” rather than following the positive Greek structure “gentle, peaceable.” Properly translated, the comparison between the two passages here is interesting. To Timothy, Paul identifies the positive characteristics of someone who is gentle and peaceable, while to Titus he identifies it in the negative – not prone to anger. The two harmonize well, and a full understanding can be drawn individually from each letter, but comparison allows us to see it more distinctly.

Able to Teach

In 1 Tim 3:2 Paul states that the overseer must be “*able to teach.*” The word (didaktikon) means “able to teach” or “skilled in teaching.” Paul does not specifically tell Timothy what the elder must be able to teach. In Titus, Paul says the elder must be able to “*hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage (urge) others with sound doctrine (sound teaching) and refute those who oppose it*” [NIV, with parenthetical alternates inserted]. Paul then continues in verses 10-16 to explain why these men must be able to do this. This clearly identifies the ability to teach as a requirement of elders in both lists.

Respectable

Paul seems very interested in the respectability of overseers in Ephesus, while no mention of respectability is found in the qualifications for Crete. Conversely, Paul specifically describes the elders in Crete as needing to be “upright, holy,” and “loving what is good,” but makes no mention of these to Timothy. What should respectability be based upon? Did Paul intend that this be spiritual respect or worldly respect, or both? It appears that in this situation he is referring primarily to respect from the church’s standpoint, because in 1 Tim 3:7 he addresses reputation from outsiders. Respect from the church could include a number of things, but it must certainly address the spiritual qualifications of the man, his walk with God, his personal righteousness, and his relationship with fellow believers – “upright, holy,” and “loving what is good.”

The Greek word translated as “respectable” is *kosmios*, meaning well-behaved, respectable; befitting, modest, orderly, well-arranged, decent.” *Kosmios* is based on the Greek word *kosmos*, which relates two meanings – that of “order, regular disposition and ornament,” with the common usage as meaning “the world, or the material universe.” This conveys a sense of wholeness and completeness in the order. So Timothy was to look for men who “had it together” spiritually and who were regarded with respect by the believers for their spirituality. If these men were compared against the list “upright, holy,” and “loving what is good” would they pass the test? It would seem so. One list is specific in characteristics, while the other addresses them generally.

Now we must ask, what was Titus looking for in these men? What the NIV translates as “upright” is the word “*dikaioi*,” meaning conforming to the standard, will, or character of God; upright, righteous, good; just, right; proper; in a right relationship with God; fair, honest; innocent. This broad range of meanings is well captured by the word “upright,” but it is useful to see the full scope of the word. The word for “holy” is “*hosion*,” meaning holy, but it is also translated in places as devout or pious. These latter two English terms can carry some negative connotations that aren’t necessarily intentioned in the Greek. What does it mean to be holy? A term we associate with being holy is “pure.” It doesn’t mean we’re perfect, but it does convey that we’ve been set apart from sin and from worldliness. Lastly, the word “*philagathon*” literally means loving what is good. One reference gives the rendering as “a fosterer of virtue,” which could certainly be a part of loving what is good. To summarize these characteristics, Titus was looking for a man who was living a life that exemplified being in a right relationship with God, being holy and loving what is good.¹²

If we revisit the issue of reputation with outsiders, could not these same specific qualities addressed in Titus “upright, holy,” “loving what is good” be substituted? I would suggest that they could, and certainly if the whole of the character qualifications are reviewed. But why did Paul address reputation with outsiders to Timothy and not to Titus? Perhaps Paul felt more confident in Timothy’s ability to assess an individual with a general guideline of reputation than he did with

¹² It is interesting to note that in Titus 2:11-14 Paul reiterates these characteristics: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” NIV.

Titus. This is unclear. If the reference in Galatians 2:1 means that Titus accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem for the council in Acts 15, then Titus was actually with Paul before Paul met Timothy in Acts 16. Even so, Paul goes to a much greater length in defining the needed spiritual qualities to Titus, in addition to the other personal qualifications. We can surely state that the reputation of a man is based upon his personal qualities in his dealings with others. To require a man to have a good reputation outside the church as well as inside is not inconsistent with the personal qualities established in both qualification lists, nor does the lack of this qualification in Titus water down the high standards of the many specific qualities defined.

All of the previous qualifications can be harmonized by either direct correlation or by concept. While the lists are not entirely identical, they do cover the same issues of a man's character. Having harmonized all the other qualifications, the remaining one is that of the elder's children.

Children

1 Timothy 3:4-5 states [NIV] *"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?)"*

Titus 1:6-7 [NIV] *"...a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless..."*

The qualification in Timothy is clearly that the elder's children must obey him with proper respect. There is no openness in this statement that could possibly suggest the children must be believers. However, in Titus, we find a disputed translation based on the same word "pistos" as is used in reference to the deacon's wives. If the word "pistos" is translated as "faithful," or perhaps "trustworthy" or "reliable", then the two passages harmonize very well indeed, as long as the reference is to the relationship between the father and the children, rather than the children's relationship to God.

It must be noted that the subject of this portion of Titus 1 is the elder and not God. The only direct reference to God in this section of Titus 1 is in the following statement (Titus 1:7) where the elder is identified as "God's steward." Just as the whole of this text is describing the qualities of the elder, so it describes the relationship between the elder and his children, not the relationship between his children and God. This is reinforced in the Greek of Titus 1:6-7, which can be rendered *"whoever is blameless, husband of one wife, having faithful children not open to the charge of being wild or disobedient; for must the overseer be blameless on the grounds that he is God's house-manager,"* "(ei tis estin anegkl_tos, mias gunaikos an_r, tekna ech_n pista, m_en kat_goria as_tias _anupotakta. Dei gar ton episkopon anegklaton einai hos theou oikonomon)." ¹³ Paul repeats the word blameless, but it is now in reference to how the overseer manages his household, because that is the way he will likely manage God's household. The issue does not appear to be others' beliefs,

¹³ Punctuation of the Greek text came at a very late date. The punctuation between Titus 1:6 and 1:7 must be reevaluated on the basis of the continuation of thought and the connective words "dei gar." Development of ecclesiastical hierarchies may have influenced the punctuation to divide qualifications for elders and bishops.

but the overseer's management abilities.¹⁴ This reading is also consistent with the requirements for the overseer's wife.

What is the issue of blame referring to here? Is it not the issue that the elder, if he fails to restrain his children, would be found to be a hypocrite if he tries to correct believers engaged in similar practices? The two words describing what the children's character should not be are *as_tias* and *anupotakta*. *As_tias* means "dissipation," "reckless living," and *anupotakta* means "disorderly," "disobedient," "outside of one's control," and "not made subject." This passage is saying that the elder's children should be faithful to their father in a manner that is demonstrated by their lifestyle. This lifestyle must be consistent so as to eliminate any reasonable charges against him. This is what enables the elder to be blameless in regard to his household.

Some have asserted that this reference to wild living and disobedience strengthens the argument against the children being believers. To the contrary, the elders are charged in verses 9-14 to rebuke rebellious (*anupotaktoi*) people so that they will be sound in the faith. The elders are certainly not rebuking non-believers. Thus, any such argument appears groundless. However, I believe the issue of these passages is not the "believing faith" of the children, but a character issue of faithful obedience to their earthly father. The construction of the verse implies that 'pistos' is to be described by two things that it is not – wild living and disobedient. In describing the character of the Cretans as a society (liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons), it appears that Paul is trying to address the need for the elders to set the standard of behavior for the church. To do this, they must demonstrate their ability to manage the church by managing their families first. This is not an issue of coming to faith, but an issue of moral conduct. Such an interpretation is consistent with 1 Timothy 3:4-5. Additionally, the rendering of Titus 1:6 as "faithful children" in reference to the relationship between the children and their father is completely consistent with 1 Timothy, because it focuses on the elder's ability to enforce proper conduct upon his children without losing their respect.

That there is great uncertainty about the translation of Titus 1:6 is clear. The following seven translations highlight this uncertainty:

American Standard Version: If any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children that **believe**, who are not accused of riot or unruly.

New American Standard: Namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who **believe**, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.

English Standard Version: If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are **believers** and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

King James Version: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having **faithful** children not accused of riot or unruly.

New King James Version: If a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having **faithful** children not accused of dissipation or unruly.

¹⁴ Other authors on this issue: Adkins, Stephen. "When Pharisees Choose Elders." Stephen.Adkins@officevision.com; Walters, Randall "An Elder's Family," randall@thewaltersgroup.com.

NIV: 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.

Wycliffe New Testament: If any man is without crime, an husband of one wife, and hath **faithful** sons, not in accusation of lechery, or not subject.

Because this is an uncertain translation, the rules for harmonizing apply: a passage that is uncertain in translation must not rule over passages that are clearer or more pervasive in the scriptures. Which passages in scripture are more clear or pervasive? To explore this, we must answer at least three difficult questions. If the translation of Titus 1:6 is to mean “believing children,” then:

1. Did the churches in Crete have different requirements from the church at Ephesus?
2. Does the use of the Greek word “teknon” for “children” refer to an elder’s progeny as minors or progeny lifelong?
3. Does the rest of scripture support the appointment or removal of a leader based upon the faith or lack of faith of a child?

Did the churches in Crete have different requirements from the churches in Ephesus?

Since it is clear that “believing” children was not a stated requirement at Ephesus, how do we harmonize the two sets of qualifications? Would there be a difference in the outcome of the standards?

In Ephesus, based on the stated qualifications to Timothy, overseers could be appointed who had non-believing children, whether or not the children were too young to believe or chose not to believe. It is possible that overseers in Ephesus could also have children who became disciples and later left the faith. The faith of the children was not addressed in the qualifications for elders in Ephesus. The respect and obedience of the children in Ephesus were criteria, and all of the elders had to be men who held the respect and obedience of all of their children. Whether the elder had two or fifteen children would make no difference; all of the children would need to be managed successfully by the elder. This makes it clear that the qualifications given to Timothy did not favor one size family over another. The ages of the children are not specified or limited, but it would appear that at least some of the children would need to be old enough to make a clear judgment on the respect and obedience criteria. Clearly the qualifications do require some “older” children, but they do not necessitate that all of them be older.

In Crete, if the elders could only be selected from a pool of men whose children were disciples – then this would suggest that at least some number of their children would be in their late teens. But does Titus 1:6 mean all of the children must be believing, or just a plurality of them? This is a critical question, because it has major implications for how many men can be considered elder candidates.

If the passage were translated as “faithful” children in relation to their father, how would it be tested? In the parable of the talents, Jesus says “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness! (Matt. 25)”” In this parable Jesus illuminates the response of a

heart to God that is respectful, obedient, and motivated by a desire to please the master (love). The success of each servant is not measured by what they had to start with, but by what they did with it. Faithful children should be measured in a similar way. This is not an age specific requirement, but one that is easily observed in a child's respect, obedience, and love for the parent. If just a plurality of a man's children respected, obeyed and loved him, and the others did not, would he be fit for the position? The point is that the elder must shepherd the whole flock and not just a part of it, success must be measured over all.

Therefore, if a man's capability to train his children is judged by his whole household of children, what happens if the passage is translated as "believing" children? Should the qualification be now judged on just two or more of his offspring and not the whole number? Should we not judge with equal measures? In Crete, all of a man's children would need to be disciples, making the elders in Crete at least a little older than those in Ephesus. This translation would limit candidates to those families with older children, would favor smaller families, and would also reduce the probable number of qualified candidates.

These differences between the qualifications would seem to be a mismatch between Crete and Ephesus. Ephesus was the urban center where higher education, better wages and smaller families would more likely be found,¹⁵ while Crete was an agrarian district and would favor large families. Even today, in our local congregation that is over 25 years old, there is still no one who can meet this criterion. Not being able to meet a criterion is not a justification for throwing it out, but it should give us pause to consider whether or not we are reading it correctly. The churches in Crete had been in existence only a short time, and the church at Ephesus had a body of elders within three years of its creation¹⁶. For there to be any elders at all, entire families would have to be converted en masse. This certainly occurred, but the references are limited. Three include Cornelius (Acts 10), Stephanus (1 Cor. 1:16) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-33).

If we accept that the two sets of qualifications are different, what guidelines are provided so that we know when each is meant to apply? As identified previously, there does not appear to be a relationship between the qualifications and typical urban versus rural communities. Both letters address the need for correction and rebuke of false teachers, the teaching of correct doctrine, and the training up of younger men and women by those who are older. I have been unable to identify any clear differences between the spiritual condition of the Ephesian church and the Cretan church. Thus, if the two sets of qualifications are different, no clear guidelines for when they should apply are evident.

¹⁵ During this period, Ephesus experienced extensive public and private building. It was known as an educational center, and for its philosophers, architects, sculptors, doctors, musicians, poets and athletes. Prosperity was evident in some palatial residences reaching five-stories in height. Paul, Artemis, the Jews and Ephesus; Strelan, p. 43.

¹⁶ Paul's first visit to Ephesus is dated as 52 AD. He returned later that year or the beginning of 53 and stayed for two-years and three months. Based on these dates, it is clear that when he speaks to the Ephesian elders during his pause in Miletus (late 55 AD), these men had to have been some of the first converts in Ephesus. "So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31). NIV. It is also possible that at least some of these elders arose from the group of disciples Paul found when he first came to Ephesus who did not know anything other than John's baptism (Acts 19:1-7).

Does the use of the Greek word "teknon" for children refer to an elder's progeny as minors or as progeny lifelong? The word can mean both, but each has implications. If the meaning refers to minors, at what point in society were minors considered no longer "children," but adults? And if they are minors, at what point can they become believers and still be regarded children? This "minor" definition would seem to split hairs, but it is important to know at what point a man is no longer responsible for his "child's" actions. If the reference is to children in general, then it should apply regardless of the age of the child. I can refer to my father as the child of my grandfather, and as long as my dad lives, I am still his child.

To comply with Paul's instructions in Ephesus, Timothy would have to observe how a man managed his children and how they obeyed and respected their father. These are actions that occur naturally within family units while children are at home and within the community as they interact. After children leave home and establish their own households, does the parent truly manage his children? It would seem that the direct application of this passage is to the elder's immediate family, those who live under his roof. Therefore the implication of the term "children" would seem to lean more toward minors, than toward the general, all age inclusive use. A child's obedience to his father after leaving home and establishing his own household would seem an inappropriate requirement. Showing proper respect could still seem to hold true, however.

In Crete, if believing children is the criterion, how did Titus evaluate this? Did he look only at the children living under the elder's roof? Or would this include all of a man's children regardless of their age and location? Would a man who had some older non-believing children already gone from home, but with other believing children at home be qualified? The scriptures do not specify, but leave the possibilities open for discussion and dispute.

These two criteria would clearly differentiate what each of the evangelists was evaluating. Timothy would be reviewing how a man manages his family and how his children obey and respect their father, while Titus would be looking at the children to see if they were believers not given to wild living or rebelliousness - very different evaluations, indeed.

Does the rest of scripture support the appointment or removal of a leader based upon the faith or lack of faith of a child? Over the years, I have seen men asked to step down from serving as elders because an adult child has left the church. This practice has been based on the failure of an elder to maintain his qualification of believing children in Titus 1:6. This practice is a logical deduction based upon the requirement for believing children.

Timothy did not have to deal with this issue. Ephesus had elders based upon the way that they managed their households, not on the basis of their children's faith. If Titus 1:6 requires elders to have believing children, then Titus did have to deal with this issue. How did he resolve such a situation? What scriptures might he have employed to explain to such leaders that they needed to step down?

I can find nowhere in scripture where a man's leadership is judged by the faith of his children. Abraham was justified by his faith; Isaac was the son of the promise who conveyed the promise to his youngest and least favored son, Jacob, by means of a ruse, and yet God is known as the God of Abraham, **Isaac and Jacob**. Jacob had twelve sons who were obviously not all godly men, and yet God still approves of Jacob, names him Israel, and claims the name **"God of Israel."** David, a man after God's own heart, is anointed king and rules over God's people most of his life. He sins, and has to deal with the impacts of his own sin by suffering strife within his own household among his many sons. Absalom murders his half-brother Amnon, who had raped Absalom's sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13). Absalom then conspires against David, proclaims himself king, and makes war on David. In all this, God does not disavow David. In fact, he makes an everlasting promise to him.

The only section of scripture that supports the removal of a leader in relation to the behavior of his children is that of Eli. It must be understood that God's judgment of Eli is not because of his sons' sins, but because he knew of their sins and failed to "restrain" them (1 Sam 3:13). Eli was shepherd of all Israel, but failed to deal with his sons who were harming God's people and treating God with contempt. God himself removes the sons and then Eli, and this judgment is consistent with all of scripture; God does not hold the sin of the father against the son, nor does he hold the sin of the son against the father. *"The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him (Ezekiel 18:20)."*

In the New Testament, there are no comments or records regarding the removal of elders, nor any other comments in regards to an elder's children. Based on the passages reviewed, the practice of removing leaders because their children fall away (sin and longer believe) does not fit the biblical record. Because this practice is different from all previous biblical examples and does not fit the way in which God applies judgment, it would appear to be a false practice derived by logical deduction based on a disputed and unclear interpretation. At the very least, it should be classified as an obscure or questionable teaching within the context of the Bible. There is no clear mechanism identified in the scriptures for the removal of leaders, including elders, other than the process identified in Matthew 18:15-17,¹⁷ modified in accordance with 1 Tim 5:19-20.¹⁸ Neither Matthew 18 nor 1 Tim 5 addresses anyone's sin except the person who sinned. Does an elder commit a sin if his child leaves the faith?

Seeking harmony based on "believing children"

If we ignore these concerns and assume that the "believing children" translation of Titus 1:6 is correct, then by what means can these two sets of leadership qualifications be harmonized? Since Paul does not identify "believing children" as a qualification to Timothy, one possible means is to

¹⁷ "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Matthew 18:15-17. NIV.

¹⁸ "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning." 1 Tim. 5:19-20. NIV.

assume that Timothy already knew of this criterion, and therefore Paul did not need to restate it. There are three likely considerations for why Timothy might already know of this criterion. First, Timothy was like a son to Paul and had been with him in many of the churches Paul established. This relationship and experience undoubtedly exposed Timothy to the process of determining and appointing elders numerous times. Second, if “believing children” was a standard qualification, then it would have been the norm among the churches. Hence, there would be little need for Paul to restate this to Timothy. Third, Ephesus had existing elders who would have been fully aware of this criterion, since Paul had appointed them.

Each of these considerations has problems. First, both Timothy and Titus share Paul’s acclamation “my true son in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2, Titus 1:4). Both had accompanied Paul and likely seen the appointment of elders. As previously mentioned, Titus had been with Paul even before Timothy, so he likely had equal or greater exposure to Paul’s appointment of elders. It therefore seems inconsistent for Paul to supply one bit of critical information to the one and not to the other, or to remind the one and not remind the other. Second, if “believing children” were the common standard of the day, why then did Paul need to inform Titus? Had Titus been isolated from what Paul was doing in all the other churches? We have no information suggesting that this was the case. It seems again inconsistent for Paul to have anticipated that the one would have been aware of a common standard when the other would not. Third, because there were existing elders in Ephesus, appointed by Paul, why would Paul need to convey to Timothy all of the other selection criteria and not need to convey the “believing children” criterion? This is especially questionable because this single criterion has such a strong implication for the elder’s family size and age, where all of the other criteria are personal character traits.

There does not appear to be a clearly defensible means to harmonize these two passages if the “believing children” translation is accepted. Because there is no comparable “believing children” statement in 1 Timothy, either harmony must be achieved based upon assumptions outside of the text, or we must conclude that the standards for elders varied. If the standards varied, then we must ask, “are the scriptures inconsistent?”

Summary

Exegetical evaluation:

- Each set of qualifications was composed by Paul, who was initially responsible for the building of both the church in Ephesus and on Crete.
- Each set of qualifications was intended to be used independently to appoint elders.
- Each set of qualifications must therefore be considered to be independently authoritative and complete.
- Combining them into one composite list was never the intent of the writer, nor was it the recipients’ response, and therefore, to do so is not a valid exegetical approach.
- For scripture to remain true, either the two sets of qualifications must be harmonized, or some clear guideline must be found to know when one should be employed over the other. No such guideline was found.

Issues of harmony between the two letters:

- Many qualifications are identical, meeting the standards for harmony by direct correlation.
- Several terms, especially the references to “respectable” in 1 Timothy, have no direct analogue in Titus. However, the greater number of specific criteria given Titus can be grouped to communicate the concept of “respectable.” This appears to fulfill the standards for harmony by concept.
- The only outstanding difference between the two sets of qualifications relates to the “believing children” versus the “faithful or trustworthy children” translation.

Implications of the “believing children” translation:

- If we accept the “believing children” translation and interpret it to mean children who are disciples, logical deduction requires that:
 1. The qualifications for elders in Ephesus and Crete were different.
 2. All of an elder’s children, regardless of age, must be believers.
 3. An elder should be removed if any of his children leave the faith.
- These logical deductions lead to real problems with scripture and practice:
 1. They establish two standards for elders without guidelines for determining when each should be followed.
 2. They establish differences between the bodies of elders depending upon which standard is used; Timothy’s list shows no age bias or family size bias, resulting in a somewhat younger and probably larger pool of possible elders, while Titus’ list favors mature children and smaller families, resulting in an older and smaller pool of potential elders.
 3. They require that an elder be removed from service for a reason other than that specified for sin in Matthew 18 or 1 Timothy 5. Requiring the removal of a leader due to children leaving the faith has no precedent in the Bible.

Implications of a single standard for elder selection:

- A single standard requires the two passages be harmonized.
- Harmonizing must respect the guideline that a passage that is uncertain in translation must not rule over one that is more clear or pervasive in scripture.
- There is no doubt about the meaning of the passage in Timothy. Titus 1:6 is recognized as a passage that is uncertain in translation.
- There are no supporting biblical examples or principles for the “believing children” translation in the scriptures.
- Therefore, we must defer to 1 Timothy, and accept the use of “faithful” or “trustworthy” in Titus 1:6 as referring to the relationship between a father and his children.

Additional supporting evidence for a single standard for elder selection:

- The structure of Titus 1:7 links the managing of God’s house with how the man manages his children, which is similar in structure and agrees with Timothy’s list. This strongly suggests that Titus’ list should be read the same way as Timothy’s.
- Neither set of qualifications requires the elder’s wife to be a believer.

- All of the other qualifications in both lists address the elder's character and not another person's faith. It would appear that the issue involved here is not the quality of others' beliefs around the elder, but the character of his relationships and how he conducts himself.
- By following proper harmonizing guidelines, the products of these two separate qualification lists, the elders themselves, are equal in family requirements, in age-maturity requirements, and in spiritual character requirements.
- Harmonization maintains unity between the scriptures and provides a clear and rational path for unity among believers.

Having said all this, can it be a benefit if an elder's wife is a disciple? Certainly! Would it be desirable? Yes! Is it a requirement of scripture?... Can it be a benefit for an elder's children to all be model believers? Certainly! Would it be desirable? Yes! Is it a requirement of scripture?... Can an elder choose to step down from leadership because a child of his has wandered away? Certainly! Would it be desirable? Is it a requirement of scripture?... Any considerations outside the requirement of scripture become areas of opinion. We must be careful to keep the dividing line between scriptural requirements and opinion very clear.

If, however, the "believing children" issue remains a "matter of opinion" as I have heard it described in public discussion recently, do we not set scripture against scripture? This has the potential to divide the local body and our brotherhood of churches as one person or congregation chooses to follow one interpretation over another. Moreover, falling back upon tradition may unduly limit the care of God's flock and place an inordinate weight of responsibility upon a too small number of men. We must recognize that this is not a small issue, but one that is central to the structure, vitality and growth of the church.

Requiring elders to have believing children and removing elder's whose children have left the faith has been practiced in the churches of Christ and in the International churches of Christ. Changing a long held belief and practice will likely not be easy or swift. But we must continually strive to restore New Testament Christianity, and not rely on past beliefs or interpretations where careful Bible study teaches us otherwise. Let us build unity from the scriptures by careful and thorough instruction.

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