

Elder Qualifications Q&A

Disclaimer: This is not intended to be an exhaustive study, but hopefully it addresses some questions which tend to be the most problematic.

Q: What does “able to teach” mean (1 Timothy 3:2)?

A: A couple of older translations render this as “apt to teach,” and the jokes then say, “Sure, he’s apt to teach ... *almost anything!*” But the single Greek word (*didaktikos*) means “able” or “skillful” at teaching. The related qualification in Titus 1:9 is “holding fast the faithful word,” and the purpose for that qualification is stated: “that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

Follow-up Question: Does he have to teach **publicly**?

A: No. An elder can carry out his work of teaching and leading and shepherding without speaking publicly. At the same time, simply being *willing* to teach publicly does not satisfy the qualification. A potential elder must demonstrate *skill* in teaching. Titus 1:10-16 details what kind of people and problems an elder will have to confront, and we need people who can handle the Word well to lead us in the truth and in the opposition of error. On a related note, *public* teaching is definitely part of the role of a *preacher*, a man who must likewise be “didaktikos” (2 Timothy 2:24).

Q: What does “hospitable” mean?

A: First, consider the **object** of our hospitality. The term is used in 1 Peter 4:9 where *all* Christians are commanded to “be hospitable to one another.” But the definition of the word (from the Greek, *philoxenos*) means “a lover of strangers.” So, hospitality cannot be limited to our love for people we already know. **Second**, consider the **manifestation** of hospitality, what it looks like in action. We have many examples and descriptions of hospitality in both the Old and New Testament. Here are a few examples: Genesis 18:1-8; cp. Hebrews 13:2; Genesis 19:1-3; Genesis 24; Judges 19; Luke 7:44-46; Luke 10:30-35; 1 Timothy 5:10; 1 John 1:5-8. We see that a person’s “love of strangers” may be demonstrated in many ways, largely depending on culture and opportunity.

Q: **Who appoints elders?**

A: The **preacher** may, as per Paul’s instructions to Titus in Titus 1:5. Naturally, the preacher must follow Paul’s *other* instructions in that passage (and other passages) about the qualifications. But not every church has a preacher. Wisdom and good judgment must always carry the day. Perhaps the closest we have to a New Testament pattern regarding a process would be when the Jerusalem church selected men to serve the needy widows in the church. In Acts 6:3, the apostles instructed, “Brethren, seek out from among you...” and the apostles stated the qualifications. In verse 5, the “**whole multitude**” then chose seven men on whom the apostles then laid hands.

Q: What **percentage of support** does a man need from the congregation in order to serve?

A: That is a **bad question**. It’s not a matter of voting or percentages. When we **choose solid men** to be elders, **the group can agree** to have them serve and can be willing to work under their leadership. It may be that a single individual identifies a valid issue which may disqualify a man. The problem should be specified with Scripture, though admittedly some of the qualifications are hard to quantify, and men meet them to varying degrees. Any concern could be discussed privately, and the man must ask himself, “**Am I solid in meeting the qualifications?**” The very fact that a sincere fellow saint would raise a

concern should sound as a loud warning. A man might decline to serve as an elder because of what is pointed out. This careful approach which respects the **scriptural concerns** of others should be applauded. A man should never be pressured to serve against his better judgment. **Patience** is crucial, because we can't rush spiritual development and maturity, and the consequences of rushing the process can be catastrophic.

Q: Does a man have to continue to meet the qualifications for as long as he serves as an elder?

A: Yes. The qualifications are stated in the **present tense** (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:2, "a bishop must be blameless"). Notice that verb tense (e.g., past, present, future, etc.) does, indeed, matter. For example, Jesus makes an important teaching point based on God's use of the present tense in Matthew 22:32, "I am the God of Abraham..." Also, the present tense in John 8:58 ("before Abraham was, I AM") makes the difference between Jesus claiming eternal existence as Jehovah God and the Jehovah's Witnesses' claim that Jesus is a created being. They do violence to the text by simply changing a verb tense and mistranslating Jesus as saying, "Before Abraham was, I have been." (For both these passages, reference Exodus 3.)

When a man is no longer sober minded, or if he becomes quick tempered or given to wine or violent or uncontrolled, he is no longer qualified. An elder should meet *all* the qualifications *continually*. If he were to be newly considered *at any time*, he would have to meet all the qualifications. Think about it from the perspective of a new member. S/he sees that one of the elders is not qualified and mentions it to someone. It's pitiful to think that our best response might be, "Well, he *used to meet* that qualification."

Follow-up Question: Is it right for a congregation to review the elders' qualifications after they've been appointed?

A: Yes. This is an **ongoing** process. In a healthy congregation, lines of communication are always open. The shepherds know the sheep, and vice versa, and it's always right for us to expect our leaders to be qualified. Sometimes congregations devise formal processes for soliciting input from the members. That's okay as long as it does not change the fundamental communications and relationships between the elders and the other members.

Note that there exists a scriptural process for dealing with **an elder who is sinning**, stated in 1 Timothy 5: "19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. 20 Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear." That may happen at any given time, so we know that a **continual** review of the elders' behavior is appropriate.

Another Follow-up Question: But, what if an elder's wife dies? This shouldn't disqualify him, because it doesn't change who he is.

A: He is no longer qualified. We must avoid reading into a passage the supposed divine reason behind a qualification. Otherwise, we open the door for reinterpreting the qualifications. The human reasoning in the question is similar to that of denominational people who seek to minimize obedience and to allow essentially any behavior. They claim to be getting "to the heart" of the commands, which is supposedly more noble than simply *following* the commands, and which is usually impossible to pin down! (That's the aim, so no one can expect anything or criticize. But read 1 Samuel 15:17-23.) In the case of elder qualifications, *sometimes* the reason behind a qualification *is* stated. For

example, 1 Timothy 3:4-7, “for if a man...” and “lest...” which is stated twice; also Titus 1:6-7, “for a bishop must...”, and Titus 1:9, “that he may be able...” But when God does not explain a qualification or state the reason for it, we must accept it at face value and not try to think our way around it.

By the way, this argument can be countered by the exact opposite conclusion using the same human reasoning: *The death of a spouse does, indeed, change a man!* Ask any widower whether he is the same after the passing of his spouse. He no longer has his “suitable helper,” his “better half.”

Q: *Can a man who has been “scripturally” **divorced** and remarried, **or widowed** and remarried, still meet the qualification of 1 Timothy 3:2, “the husband of one wife”?*

A: Yes. Again we consider the present tense of the qualification. **His past is not under consideration** as far as his marital status is concerned, and **his past is not cumulative**. Even though he may have had two or more wives over the course of his life, he has (likely) only ever had one at a time — or, more to the point, only *has one at the present time*. The passage obviously disallows bigamy (which may be an issue in some countries). Also, I’m told that the Greek phrase may imply a *faithful commitment* to the wife, which would specifically disqualifies a married man who flirts.

Q: *Must a man have **more than one child** in order to be considered as having “children”?*

A: No. This answer is a matter of how language is used grammatically. The classic example is of Sarah, who we know had only one child. Genesis 21:7 quotes a general saying, applied to her condition: “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne *him* a son....” So, the term “children” can refer to a single child, depending on how it’s used. For a modern example, someone asks, “Do you have children?” The father of a single child replies, “Yes, we have a sweet daughter.”

Q: *Do his **children** have to be **Christians**?*

A: Yes. Simply the word “faithful” in Titus 1:6 does not necessarily demand “faith” in the Lord, but notice the context. In verses 10-16, the “insubordinate” are described in detail and they stand in stark contrast with true believers. They include idle talkers and deceivers who cause trouble because they are teaching inappropriate things. They are unsound in the faith and have turned from the truth, etc. So the “faithful” must be older than small children, and are people who are following the Lord. Also, judging from 1 Timothy 3:4-5, we see that the man’s dealings with his household reflect on his ability to take care of the church. So, this involves more than the activities necessary for providing for small children and keeping them submissive; it has to do with nurturing spiritual development. In other words, a man must have at least one child who has obeyed the gospel and is faithful, and all of a man’s children who are spiritually responsible to God must be Christians. A man is not disqualified because of a mentally handicapped child, or because he also has small children at home, or because his wife becomes pregnant after he has been appointed as an elder.

Q: *Do **all** of his **children** have to be **faithful**?*

A: Yes. According to Titus 1:6-7, the children must be “faithful” and “not accused of insubordination.” An unfaithful and/or insubordinate child would disqualify a man. That is true for every child. It cannot be true for one child and not for another. We have no basis for excusing one (or some) of the children. Besides, if not all the children are expected to be faithful, where can we draw the line?

Q: Do **adult children** count toward the qualification?

A: Yes. Are they still his children? *Of course.* At 51, I am still my father's son, like it, or not. Do a man's faithful adult children still "count" to *qualify him*? *Of course.* (Otherwise, the man whose children grow up and leave the household no longer has *any* children at all!) Therefore, the *unfaithful* ones still "count" to *disqualify* him!

Follow-up Question: *But 1 Timothy 3:4 says, "one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence." This clearly refers to children living at home.*

A: I agree that it would **include** any children who are living in his household. **But** Titus 1 uses broader language: Verse 6, "having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination." My conclusion is that the children must be in submission at home, *and must be* faithful and not accused on dissipation or insubordination at all times.

Note the connection in Titus 1 between a man's household and *his* reputation: "6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless...." Having a child of *any age* who is unfaithful to the Lord or who is otherwise accused of serious misbehavior leaves the man open to criticism.

Also note that we are not talking about a man bearing the guilt for his son's behavior. See Ezekiel 18. We are simply talking about the impact on a man's reputation — whether or not he can be considered blameless. Even a man who is faithful in every way and diligent as a parent may not be qualified to serve as a shepherd of God's people, and no one who is qualified is perfect in every way. But thanks be to God who, in His boundless grace, allows us to serve Him in various capacities in spite of our failings, and for children who follow Him, rather than their fallible parents.

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Reasons people water down the qualifications:

- 1) We want elders at all costs.** While it's true that a congregation has something "lacking" as long as it has no elders (Titus 1:5), the solution is *not* to appoint unqualified men. The phrase "sow the wind, reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7, in a context about apostasy and false worship) comes to mind here. But people sometimes seem desperate to have elders...
- **To avoid having "men's meetings."** Sadly, this may be because we are not of one mind, we cannot deal with disagreements, we have dysfunctional communication, and we cannot make decisions together. The solution is not to put unqualified men in a position of leadership and make *them* deal with it.
 - **To confront sin.** It's good to have capable teachers to help lead the resistance against error. Sadly, though, sometimes we want to avoid having to confront sinners *ourselves*. Perhaps we want "a king to fight for us"? (Cp. 1 Samuel 8:20.) We cannot pass off our personal responsibility to someone else.
 - **To seize power.** Too often, a self-willed man wants to become an elder. Not only is he, himself, disqualified (because he is self-willed), but he seeks to find *anyone else* to be appointed as a figure head so there will be the appearance of having a plurality of elders. In that way, the self-willed man will get to reign. (I purposefully did not say "serve.") Beware Diotrophes! (3 John 1:9-10)

2) We expect failure. We see failure all around us, and we *live* with failure in ourselves. We fail in our own dedication to the Lord, we fail in leading our families in paths of righteousness, and we fail in cultivating faith in our children. But we must not move the bar lower to make it easier to jump over. If we change the Lord's arrangement for the church, it will no longer be the church He designed!

We must push ourselves toward deeper commitment and better service in order to achieve God's will for us. Yes, God's standards are high. His expectations for His leaders have always been strict and very rigorous. Remember that our enemies are constantly looking for reasons and opportunities to tear us down. Learn from the Bible accounts that God's people always did their best when their leaders were rock solid in their faith. So I make no apology for the answers in this document. We must *not* plan for failure, nor should we make excuses for it. Let's expect **victory** and plan for **success** with the Lord's help!

Finally, a word about our general approach to these questions. Whenever we attempt to explain difficult scriptures or those that allow for some personal judgment, we are faced with choosing between a **solid path** and a **questionable** one, one that opens the door to division and criticism from outsiders. We cannot afford to have men serving in a position of serious responsibility who do not meet the qualifications set forth in Scripture. When solid men are appointed, unity invariably prevails; when questionable men are appointed, division naturally occurs. This series of Q&A has demonstrated **sound doctrine** that will lead us down a path of clear conscience and unity with no regrets.