

Family Requirements for Eldership

by

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Abstract

The New Testament contains two lists of requirements for elders. While it is well-known that the lists focus on character issues, this article demonstrates that the candidate's family life holds pride of place amongst the character requirements for eldership. Then it analyses interpretations of the family requirements in the two lists, drawing conclusions as to what it means to be a blameless husband and a blameless father.

1. Introduction

What is the most important criterion for appointing an elder in a local church? The three areas that are usually considered are calling, charisma and character. Although in practice character is often relegated to third place,² both the biblical lists of requirements for

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² The character requirements laid down in the 1 Timothy and Titus are used as a final checklist at the end of the selection process rather than as a guiding light for the entire process. After candidates with evidence of the desired calling and charisma have been identified, their character is quickly checked to see if it disqualifies them from the office of eldership.

eldership give it pride of place (see 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Tit 1:5-9). In fact, they deal almost exclusively with character matters. Although it may not always be consistently applied, the fact that the lists prioritise godliness over giftedness is never questioned. The question that is seldom asked is whether some aspects of candidates' character should be given priority when evaluating them for eldership.

The first part of this article will demonstrate that the two lists of requirements for eldership not only emphasise character, but also give pride of place to the character of a candidate's family life. Within the construction of the two lists, the family requirements hold centre stage. The candidate's family life is the most important area to be evaluated when assessing his eligibility for eldership.

If the family requirements are most emphasised, what exactly are those requirements? Scholars have proposed varied interpretations of the family requirements. The second part of the article will review those proposals, analyse the interpretive difficulties and conclude with some proposals as to what is required of elders with respect to their character as husbands and fathers.³

2. The Family First

The literary structure of each list of eldership requirements indicates that the family requirements for elders hold pride of place. If this claim is true, then they should hold pride of place in the thinking of local churches when appointing elders. On what grounds, then, is the claim

³ In the two texts that are the object of discussion in this article, 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, the qualifications for eldership are stated in masculine terms. Opinions are divided over whether this was intended to imply that elders had to be men (male). Since my intent is to analyse the lists of qualifications for eldership found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, I shall consistently refer to elders in masculine terms, in keeping with the language of the Biblical texts. I do not hereby intend to imply that the texts exclude women from serving as elders.

made? A careful analysis of the manner in which Paul⁴ constructed the two lists suggests that he wished to emphasise the statements about the potential elder's family conduct.

2.1. *The Structure of 1 Timothy 3:1-7*

The list opens with a generic requirement that *an elder must be above reproach* (δεῖ οὖν τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνεπίληπτον εἶναι).⁵ The adjective ἀνεπίληπτos refers to being *above reproach* or *beyond criticism*, referring to “one who nothing which an adversary could seize upon with which to base a charge” (Zodhiates 2000).

A string of nouns, adjectives and participial phrases in the accusative case follow, all standing in apposition to ἀνεπίληπτos. The semantic relationship is GENERIC-specific; each accusative names one specific area in which an elder must be *above reproach*.

Three things immediately stand out about this list.

1. The list appears to be an impromptu catalogue of requirements for eldership. Unlike the parallel passage in Titus, the 16 specifics are in a quite random order, as if Paul was simply listing them as they came to mind.⁶ Further evidence that the list was dictated impromptu lies in the fact that all the early requirements—except for μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα—are single words (vv. 2-3), while all the lengthier requirements come towards the end. In general, impromptu lists start with the one-word items and put lengthier characteristics later, as the author can no longer think of short expressions for them. These characteristics of impromptu lists mark as prominent (a) items

⁴ Although Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles is assumed throughout this article, the view of authorship taken has no significant bearing on the argument. For a detailed defence of Pauline authorship, see Guthrie (1996) or Knight (1992).

⁵ All Scriptures are the author's own translation of UBS4 unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ The only obvious evidence of semantic arrangement is the placement of two pairs of synonyms side-by-side (νηφάλιον σώφρονα and ἐπιεικὴ ἄμαχον).

at the beginning, the first ones the author thought of, (b) items at the end, which are included even though they are not as neat as the earlier ones and (c) items in the beginning or middle that are abnormally long.

2. Therefore, the placement of $\mu\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota\kappa\omicron\varsigma$ $\acute{\alpha}\nu\delta\rho\alpha$ at the head of the list is significant, firstly because it implies this is the first thing to come to mind and secondly because it is the only item in the first 11 specifics that is not a single word.
3. Similarly, the length of the discussion about how an elder manages his family (vv. 4-5) marks it out as prominent. It is the first of three lengthy requirements in which Paul takes time to discuss the reason why it is imperative.

These three factors indicate that the family requirements hold a prominent place in the requirements for eldership as laid down in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. They are not just two amongst a long list; they are two of the most important ones.

2.2. The Structure of Titus 1:5-9

The Titus list is much more structured than the Timothy list. Titus, which was written after 1 Timothy, covers similar subject matter but does so in a much more succinct and patterned manner (see Fee 1988). There is clear evidence of Titus' literary dependence on Timothy, leading one to conclude that Paul used the first letter as a guide for writing the second, but took the opportunity to revise and refine his earlier draft. Nowhere in the letter is this editing more evident than in the eldership lists. The list in Titus is a highly structured, rhetorically effective presentation of the requirements for elders.

The following outline illustrates the organisation of the list.

- A. An elder must be blameless (v. 6)
 - 1. As a husband
 - 2. As a father

- B. An overseer⁷ must be blameless (vv. 7-8)
 - 1. Five prohibitions (v. 7)
 - 2. Six commands (v. 8)

Note how Paul has rearranged the requirements so that the family requirements are grouped at the start of the list. The generic command, *an elder must be blameless* (δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνέγκλητον εἶναι), is repeated before the family requirements and after them, the latter introducing the non-family requirements separately. This ‘framing’ appears to be a deliberate attempt to single out the family requirements so as to highlight them as the most important criteria for eldership.

2.3. *The Significance of the Structure*

The structure of both lists of eldership requirements suggests that the family requirements were foremost in Paul’s thinking. In Timothy, the positioning of μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνήρ, a phrase rather than a single word, at the head of the list, coupled with the lengthy discussion about the importance of *managing his own family well* (τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον), serve to emphasise the family requirements. In Titus, Paul rearranged the list, grouping the family requirements together at the head of the list and framing them with *an elder must be blameless*. The point is clear—the family requirements hold pride of place when evaluating a candidate for eldership.

If the family requirements hold pride of place, then it is crucial that we understand what they require with respect to an elder’s family life. Although the specific commands may seem straightforward, there are

⁷ For a defence of the dominant view that “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) and “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος) are used interchangeably, see Mappes (1997).

significant difficulties in pinpointing their exact meaning. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the family requirements in an attempt to understand what they require of a potential elder.

3. The Blameless Husband

The requirement of a husband is identical in both lists—he must be μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ. The literal rendering would be *a man of one woman* or *a husband of one wife*. The only linguistic ambiguity arises from the fact that ἀνὴρ can refer to a man or a husband and γυνή a woman or a wife. Yet the phrase has been the object of a bewildering variety of interpretations, as a brief survey of four prominent English translations render reveals:

NIV	a husband of but one wife
NKJV	the husband of one wife
NLT	faithful to his wife
NRSV	married only once

These four translations hint at the major suggestions concerning the force of the Greek phrase. The proposals concerning its meaning fall into five categories:

1. Prohibiting divorce
2. Prohibiting remarriage: *married only once*
3. Prohibiting polygamy: *a husband of only one wife*
4. Requiring marriage: *a husband of one wife*
5. Requiring fidelity: *a faithful husband*

Let us analyse the options and try to figure out what Paul required of an elder with respect to his married life.

1. **Prohibiting divorce.** Glasscock (1983) suggests this is the most common view, namely, that Paul is prohibiting any divorced person from serving as an elder. However, although the view may be popular, it is not easily derived from the text because there is nothing in the phrase μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ to suggest divorce is the topic of discussion. If Paul wished to prohibit *all*

divorced men from serving as elders, surely he would have done so explicitly, saying *not divorced* (μὴ ἀπολυθέντα).

The crucial question is whether a divorced man could be deemed blameless in the fulfilment of his family responsibilities. This is not the place to discuss the doctrine of divorce, but I would suggest that there are three situations in which a divorced man *may* qualify for eldership: (a) if his wife was unfaithful, (b) if his wife deserted him and, arguably, (c) if his divorce preceded his conversion and he has demonstrated blameless character since his conversion. In general, a divorced man would not be blameless in his marital conduct, but rare exceptions are possible.

2. **Prohibiting remarriage.** Does μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ exclude remarried men from eldership? This is possible, since the most natural translation would be *a husband of one wife*. The forefronted position of μιᾶς emphasises *one*, which could mean Paul is highlighting the fact that an elder must have had only one wife, not two or more.

Some suggest this would exclude a man who remarried after his spouse had died, but “since the Scriptures do not prohibit remarriage after the death of one’s spouse, and actually encourage it in some cases (cf. 1 Tim 5:14), it is unlikely that such a remarried man should be disqualified” (Lea and Griffin 2001:280).

More pertinent is the suggestion that it excludes a man who is divorced and remarried. In general, a divorced and remarried man would not be blameless in terms of his family life. However, the same possible exceptions exist as with a divorced man who is not remarried: (a) adultery—if his first wife was unfaithful, (b) abandonment—if his wife deserted him and, arguably, (c) if he was converted after his divorce.

3. **Prohibiting polygamy.** The logic behind this view is similar to that behind the previous one, namely, that the emphasis is on *one* wife. However, whereas the previous view takes it to mean

he has not had more than one wife in total, this view understands it to mean he does not have more than one wife *at present*.

Although linguistically plausible, this view is unlikely to have been relevant to the original readers. “The prevailing type of marriage in Jewish, Greek and Roman society was monogamous” (Ferguson 1992:69). Keener (1993:612) claims that “polygamy was not practiced in the Roman world outside Palestine.” Therefore, it seems unlikely that a prohibition against polygamy would head the list of qualifications for eldership. Furthermore, if this was the point, Paul could and should have made it explicit by using a negative command (*not having two wives*), because he could not expect his readers to interpret μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ as a prohibition against polygamy.

So, while μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ certainly excludes a polygamist, excluding polygamists is certainly not its primary intention.

- 4. Requiring marriage.** A popular, as opposed to academic, interpretation of *a husband of one wife* is that it requires marriage. The point would be that a single man may not serve as an elder. Advocates often draw attention to Paul’s requirement that an elder must *manage his own family well* (1 Tim 3:4), arguing that unless a man has demonstrated good family management, he may not pastor a church.

However, this view does not bear up under scrutiny. First, it neglects Paul’s emphasis, stressing ἀνὴρ (*a husband of one wife*) whereas the Greek phrase emphasises μιᾶς (*a husband of one wife*). Second, to the best of our knowledge, Paul, Timothy and Titus were all unmarried, yet all three had served as leaders of local churches, and Timothy and Titus were acting elders at the time of writing. Third, it runs counter to Paul’s teaching about singleness and marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Fourth, if *a husband of one wife* (1 Tim 3:2) requires marriage, then *his children obey him* (1 Tim 3:4) requires that he also have at least two children.

This would exclude barren couples and families with only one child.

Since marriage was the normal state and the vast majority of candidates for eldership would have been married, the requirement that an elder be μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ simply assumes the candidate will probably be married, but does not require that he be married.

- 5. Requiring faithfulness.** This view holds that μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ points to a *one-woman man* (literally, *a man of one woman*). The focus is not on his marital status, but on his marital and sexual conduct and character. When understood in the light of the generic requirement that an elder be blameless, the phrase μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ describes a man “who cannot be taken hold of on the score of sexual promiscuity or laxity” (Lenski 1946:580). Glasscock (1983:249) explains the implications of this interpretation:

This understanding emphasises the character of the man rather than his marital status. Thus even a single man or a man who has been married only once must demonstrate that he is not a ‘playboy’ or flirtatious, but that he is stable and mature in character toward his wife and other females. A man who demonstrates a character of loyalty and trustworthiness in such personal relationships is qualified in this area. He, being a one-woman type of man, can be placed in this high position and trusted to deal in maturity and with discretion in a situation involving female members.

This is by far the best interpretation of μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ in context. Paul’s chief concern is that an elder be blameless in character and conduct. The point of this particular requirement is that his conduct in relation to women must be above reproach. If he is married, it means he is loyal to his wife, not only sexually but also emotionally and spiritually. Whether he is single or married, his relationships with women must be

faultless; there must not even be a hint of impropriety (see 1 Tim 5:2).

If this is what Paul meant, why did he not phrase it unambiguously, such as ἀνδρὰ πιστά (*a faithful husband*) or μὴ ἐπιθυμοῦντα (*not lustful*)? Neither of these expressions is adequate. ἀνδρὰ πιστά is too vague and μὴ ἐπιθυμοῦντα is too restrictive. The chosen phrase, μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ, is vivid, visual and concrete, conjuring up a strong image of a one-woman kind of man, a faithful and committed husband who does not have wondering eyes or a jealous heart.

This interpretation best captures the spirit of Paul's requirements. First, it sets a high standard for eldership. Not only must a man's external conduct be blameless, but even his internal character must be flawless. Simply not being divorced, for example, is not enough; he must be positively devoted to his wife with a loyalty that comes from the heart. Second, it is balanced and sensible, allowing some room for grace and restoration after past failures. Bigamists and polygamists are certainly excluded, but some divorced or remarried men—those whose failed marriages were not the result of their impropriety—may be considered if their present character is blameless.

4. The Blameless Father

Although they have attracted less attention and sparked less controversy, the parenting requirements for eldership are just as difficult to interpret as μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ. Here is a graphic display of the two texts:

1 Timothy 3:4	1 Timothy 3:4
τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον, τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ, μετὰ πάσης σεμνότητος.	leading his own household well keeping children in submission with all seriousness

Titus 1:6	Titus 1:6
τέκνα ἔχων πιστά, μὴ ἐν κατηγορίᾳ ἀσωτίας ἢ ἀνυπότακτα.	having faithful children not wild or rebellious

There are two difficulties, one in 1 Timothy 3:4 and the other in Titus 1:6. I shall examine them in chronological order.

4.1. *Loving Leadership*

The problem in 1 Timothy 3:4 concerns whether the two supporting phrases are describing the conduct of the father or the conduct of the children. Paul starts with a generic requirement that an elder must lead his household well. The supporting phrases, however, allow for two interpretations (see Knight 1992; Lea and Griffin 2001). The two semantic displays illustrate the two options.

Interpretation A: Children-focused

He must lead his own family well	HEAD
so that his children are submissive	Result
with complete respect.	Manner

The two supporting phrases are understood as describing the conduct and attitude of the children—they are submissive and respectful. The subordinate participial clause, τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ (literally, *having children in submission*), states the result of the head clause. The point is that the father's family leadership is of such a nature that it inspires respect and commands obedience (as opposed to demanding it).

Interpretation B: Father-focused

He must lead his own family well	HEAD
keeping his children in submission	Specific
with all seriousness.	Manner

The two supporting phrases are understood as describing the conduct and attitude of the father—he takes seriously his duty to keep his children under control. The subordinate participial clause, τέκνα

ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ (literally, *having children in submission*), stands in apposition to the head clause and serves to clarify exactly what a father who leads his family well does—he keeps his children under control. σεμνότης must here carry a connotation of ‘seriousness’ or ‘soberness’, indicating that the father takes seriously or soberly his duty to keep his children in order.

So which interpretation is correct? The first option has the better of it because the evidence indicates that *the picture is of a parent whose caring leadership inspires submission and respect rather than of an authoritarian parent who enforces legalistic discipline in the home*. Four pieces of evidence support this conclusion. First, the verb translated lead (προϊστημι) has two primary meanings, (a) ‘rule, direct’ and (b) ‘care for’ (BAGD). Knight (1992) shows that these two meanings sometimes merge to portray *caring leadership*. The parallel placement of προϊστημι (*lead*) and ἐπιμελέομαι (*care for*) in verse 5 makes this sense explicit here. Second, all other occurrences of ὑποταγή (*submission*) in the New Testament portray voluntary submission rather than enforced obedience (see 2 Cor 9:13, Gal 2:5 and 1 Tim 2:11).⁸ Third, the most natural and common sense of σεμνότης indicates “behaviour which is fitting, implying a measure of dignity leading to respect” (Louw and Nida 1989:§88.46). The father’s dignified leadership of his family inspires respect from his children. Fourth, the parallel passage in Titus (Tit 1:6), which appears to be a refined version of this passage, focuses on the godly character of the children rather than on what the father does to control them.

In conclusion, a potential elder must exemplify strong but loving leadership in his family. Just as a teacher is judged by the performance of his students and a coach by the success of his team, so the parent is evaluated by the attitude of his children. If they are voluntarily submissive because they deeply respect him, he may be assumed to be a loving leader of his family.

⁸ The cognate verb ὑποτάσσω, when referring to husband-wife or parent-child relationships, is always used in the middle voice, indicating that voluntary submission is in view.

4.2. Faithful Children

The difficulty in Titus 1:6 concerns the meaning of πιστός in the clause τέκνα ἔχων πιστά. It could mean *having believing children* or *having faithful children* depending on whether an active or passive meaning is ascribed to πιστά. Although all major English translations prefer *having believing children*, the choice is not an easy one. Commentators are divided. Barrett (1963), Dibelius and Conzelmann (1972), Hanson (1966), Hendricksen (1957), Kelly (1963), Lea and Griffin (2001) and Quinn (1990) all favour *having believing children*, but Guthrie (1957), Knight (1992), Lock (1924) and Towner (1994) prefer *having faithful children*.

The evidence weighs slightly in favour of *having faithful children* on three grounds. First, in the Greco-Roman social system, church elders were “drawn from the functioning heads of households” (Wright 1996); these heads probably determined the religion of the entire household (Tidball 1983). Therefore, the most relevant meaning of πιστά is *faithful* because *believing* is taken for granted. Telling those who are already believers that they must be believers is redundant, but telling them they must be faithful as believers is meaningful.

Second, the entire ethical concern of the letter is with observable behaviour that affects the church’s reputation with outsiders. Three statements in Titus focus on external behaviour: *an elder must be blameless* (1:6, 7); *so that no one will malign the Word of God* (2:5); and *so that in every way they may make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive* (2:10). All these statements occur in lists of ethical instructions and indicate that Paul’s focus is on conduct that commends rather than condemns the gospel.

Third, the list of qualifications for elders in Titus is a revised and refined form of the ones in 1 Timothy. Therefore, the parallel passages shed light on each other. In 1 Timothy 3:4, the requirement is phrased τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ (*having children in submission*) instead of τέκνα ἔχων πιστά. The earlier passage clearly focuses not on the spiritual condition but on the ethical conduct of a potential elder’s children. The refined version surely bears the same intent.

Fourth, the qualifying clauses that modify τέκνα ἔχων πιστά in Titus 1:6—*not wild or rebellious*—strongly support the view that Paul is alluding to the blameless conduct of the children, not to their confession of faith. Semantically, they function as practical examples of the requirement laid down in the head clause.

<p>τέκνα ἔχων πιστά, μη ἐν κατηγορίᾳ ἀσωτίας ἢ ἀνυπότακτα.</p>	<p>HEAD Specific 1 Specific 2</p>
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These two propositions qualify, by way of contrast, what it means to be τέκνον πιστόν (*a faithful child*). ἐν κατηγορίᾳ refers to being subject to an accusation, thus alluding to vices that are observable to onlookers. ἀστυία refers to *wild, reckless living*, often with the connotation of wasting money on selfish pleasures, especially drunkenness (Rienecker 1980). ἀνυπότακτα means *undisciplined, disobedient, rebellious* (BAGD). Together, these two qualifiers paint a picture of young adults who are out of control, being undisciplined and insubordinate, living wild and lavish lives. If a potential elder’s children are known to be wild and rebellious, they bring shame on him and discredit his ability to lead his family well (1 Tim 3:4). These qualifiers are the most powerful case for τέκνα πιστά meaning *faithful children*.

Thus, τέκνα ἔχων πιστά is best translated as *having faithful children*, implying that the candidate’s children should not only be believers, but also be faithful believers whose conduct brings credit to the gospel. If the children are faithful to their father’s values, in this case Christian values, rather than being wild and rebellious, their conduct testifies to the level of his leadership and integrity in the home.

5. The Blameless Church

If a church wishes to take seriously the biblical requirements for eldership when appointing leaders, it should take the following guidelines into account.

1. *The candidate’s character is more important than his charisma.* Rather than choosing a leader on the basis of his gifting and then using

1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 as a final checklist to ensure there are no gaping holes in his character, those responsible for appointing leaders should give character issues pride of place throughout the selection process.

2. *The candidate's family life is more important than his church life.* Paul placed priority on the quality of the potential elder's family life, singling it out as the most important criterion by which to evaluate his eligibility for leadership in the church. Although a man's ecclesiastical conduct is vital, his conduct at home are a far better measure of his real character. He may be able to conceal serious character flaws in public, but he will never be able to hide them in the privacy of his home. Therefore, before appointing a man to eldership, a serious attempt should be made to confirm that his home life is blameless. This is best done by observing the conduct of his children, since their behaviour, for better or for worse, reveals whether he commands their respect.
3. *The candidate's present conduct is more important than his past misconduct.* The spirit of Paul's command that an elder must be a *faithful husband* has to do with the blameless character of his present Christian witness within his family and community. While it may often be the case that man is disqualified by a failed marriage, it is not necessarily the case that a failed marriage automatically disqualifies him. A candidate who has been divorced (and remarried) may still be eligible for eldership if it can be established that (a) he was not to blame for marriage's failure and (b) he is blameless in his present relationships with women.
4. *The nature of the candidate's relationships with women is more important than his marital status.* An elder must be *blameless* in his relationships with women; there must be no hint of impropriety about his relationships with them. Paul's chief concern was not whether a man was married or single, or even whether he was married once or twice (though the latter would usually be unacceptable); his real focus was on the fact that the candidate be a one-woman kind of man—not a womaniser, not having

roaming eyes. Both an unmarried man with a reputation for being a ladies' man and a married man who does not give evidence of total loyalty to his wife should be considered ineligible for eldership.

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