

Elder Qualification: Regarding Children (Titus 1:6)

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Framing the Discussion

One of the most critical issues for the health of a local church is the qualification of those who are given the responsibility by Jesus Christ for the oversight of his Church. It has been stated that the single most important human factor in the health of a church is the quality of its leadership. It came as no surprise when Paul established churches he included the appointing of Elders (Acts 14:23). When he passed on the ministry to his protégés, Timothy and Titus, he highlighted the importance of Elders and gave these men instructions on what they should look for in the lives of the men they would appoint to Eldership. Paul tells Titus in his letter to him (Titus 1:5) to set things in order, including the appointing of Elders. He then describes an elder's qualifications.

One of the qualifications often debated concerns the Elder and his children found in Titus 1:6. Although there is a similar qualification found in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, the debate centers around the Titus 1:6 passage, this paper will attempt to discern, from the context, Paul's intended meaning so it might be applied appropriately at Bethel Church of Houston.

Four different views exist regarding Titus 1:6:

1. All elders must have believing children, no matter what the children's ages.
2. All elders must have believing children while those children are in the household.
3. All elders must have faithful, obedient children no matter what the children's ages.
4. All elders must have faithful, obedient children while those children are in the household.

There are three issues in the interpretation of this text impacting which of the four views one is to accept. The first is the meaning of "pista" (pista). The second seeks to understand if the final phrase linked by "kai" (kai) is copulative or emphatic. The third issue is the referent of "tekna" (tekna). This paper will first explore these questions in the order listed before stating a conclusion and application.

The Meaning of Pista (pista)

The term "pistos" (from which the accusative case "pista" comes) has one of two primary meanings: 1) faithful or trustworthy, 2) believing or faith. Translations and commentators disagree on the meaning of "pista" in this text. In order to determine the best translation, let us look at the use of "pistos" in Titus and then in the other Pastoral Epistles.

"Pistos" in the book of Titus is compelling given you would expect the author to use the term in the same sense in the same letter. The adjective "pistos" appears three times in

this letter. The first is the passage in question, and the term is in the accusative case. The second is in Titus 1:9, a continuation of the qualification of an Elder. This important usage is nearby, and contextually, it is dealing with the qualifications of an Elder. This verse states, "holding fast the faithful (pistou) word (logou) which is in accordance to the teaching so that he will be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." This usage is in the genitive case modifying "word." The meaning is clearly "faithful." "Believing word" would not make sense within the context.

The third use in the book of Titus is in Titus 3:8, where again, the term is associated with the term "word" (logos). Here the standard translation is "this is a trustworthy (pistos) statement." Again, to say this is a "believing statement" would make no sense in this context. Therefore, in the other two usages in Titus, the meaning is "faithful" or "trustworthy."

It would do well to mention here we are dealing with "pistos" and not "pistis." "Pistis" in the noun form is used six times in the book of Titus. Douglas Jacoby sums up the difference in these two terms as follows:

“...we examine two related words, both of which appear extremely often in the New Testament...They are pistis (PIStis) and pistos (pisTOS). The basic sense of pistis is 'faith, trust, belief.' (Note: faith and belief are synonyms. There is no real difference in meaning. Of course, we are not justified by empty faith (James 2), but rather by faith with content, faith with heart.)

The second word, pistos, means "faithful, trustworthy, reliable" but can also occasionally mean "believing." (Note: In Titus 1, the somewhat controversial "eldership" passage about children, modern translations favor "believing" as the translation, but either alternative is possible.)¹

Expanding the analysis of "pistos" to the other Pastoral Epistles yields mixed results. There are ten uses of the term in 1 Timothy and three in 2 Timothy. For simplicity, we will start with the three verses that are used in the accusative case since that is the case used in Titus 1:6. These passages include the following:

1 Timothy 1:12, "I thank Jesus Christ our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful (piston, piston), putting me into service even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor."

Although the term could be translated either "believing" or "faithful," all translators consulted for this paper (NASB, NIV, ESV, NRSV, NKJV) are consistent in translating the term "faithful." The broader context seems to be Paul's unique calling as one entrusted with the message of the gospel.

¹ "See www.douglasjacoby.com.

1 Timothy 3:11, "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful (pistoß, pistas) in all things." Again, the term could be translated either "believing" or "faithful," but all translators consulted for this paper are consistent in translating the term "faithful" (NASB, ESV, NRSV, NKJV) or "trustworthy" (NIV)." It does not seem to fit the context to say a qualification of a deacon's wife or a female deacon (another discussion) is that she is "believing in all things" without "all things" being qualified. Faithful again fits the context of a character qualification similar to what is in Titus 1:6.

1 Timothy 6:2, "Those who have believers (pistouß, pistous) as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren..." Here the translators are consistent in translating the term "believing." The context demands such a translation since the qualifying statement or the reason they are to show them respect is that they are "brethren" not because of a character quality they possess.

These three uses indicate the context is the controlling determinant of the translation, but that there is a propensity for Paul to use this term in the sense of "faithful."

The remaining uses in the Pauline Epistles reveal similar results. Translated "faithful" or "trustworthy" we have the following:

1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 4:9 and 2 Timothy 2:11 can all be translated, "It is a trustworthy (pistoß, an adjective in the nominative case) statement (logoß, logos)..."

1 Timothy 4:12, "Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith (pistwn, an adjective in the genitive case) and purity..."

2 Timothy 2:2, "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful (pistoiß, adjective, in the dative) men who will be able to teach others also."

2 Timothy 2:13, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful" (pistoß, an adjective in the nominative case).

The following are most often translated with some form of "believing":

1 Timothy 4:3, "men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by all those who believe (pistoiß, an adjective in the dative case) and know the truth."

1 Timothy 4:10, "For it is for this we labor and strive because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers (piswn, an adjective in the genitive case)."

1 Timothy 5:16, "If any woman who is a believer (piste, an adjective in the nominative case) has dependent widows, she must assist them..."

The summary of the usage of the word leaves us with no definitive conclusions. It does indicate the feasibility of use as well as the importance of context. The fact that in the most immediate context, the letter to Titus, the term is used consistently with the meaning of "faithful," leads to a reasonable conclusion of consistent use in Titus 1:6.

Is There One Qualification or Two?

One of the interpretive keys is the consideration if there is one qualification or two in the Titus 1:6 passage. Does Paul intend to say that the children must be "believers" or "faithful," and they also must "not be open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination?" The conjunction kai (kai) is either translated "and" in the popular versions or it is left untranslated. Here are the different translations for comparison:

ESV: "his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination."

NASB: "having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion."

NIV: "a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient."

NRSV: "whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious."

The NKJV: "having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination."

NET: "with faithful children who cannot be charged with dissipation or rebellion."

HCSB: "having faithful children not accused of wildness or rebellion."

It would be laborious to examine every use of the term (kai) in Scripture or the writings of Paul. The meaning is well established. The much-respected Liddel-Scott lexicon states, "[kai is] used in two principal senses, either copulative, to join words and sentences, ...or making a single word or clause emphatic, also, even, ..." (Liddell, p. 391).

Those who translate the term "and" have opted for the first meaning. Those who have left the term untranslated leave a modicum of ambiguity, but the sense more aligns with the second meaning.

Conclusion Regarding Pistos (pistos) and kai (kai)

From a purely grammatical standpoint, several translation options are available. However, the meaning seems to align best with a translation that includes "pista" as "faithful" with the conjunction "kai" being used in an emphatic sense, further explaining "pista" (NKJV, NET, and HCSB follow this translation). Two axioms are supporting this position.

First, the parallel passage in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 indicates that the concern is how submissiveness or obediently his children behave and says nothing about the belief or faith of the children. The overriding measurable quality is keeping his children submissive. That text states, “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”

The passage in Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:4 are not dealing with different qualifications but the same qualification. The children are "submissive" or "faithful." The final phrase of Titus 1:6 is explanatory of what “pista” means in this context. By “pista” he means that the children are being submissive to the father and not charged with “dissipation or rebellion.” These two terms clearly define the opposite, not of “believing” but of “submission.”

The link between these two verses cannot be overstated. It seems clear in comparing these two verses, the intended meaning of Paul. Core qualifications are given to two different church leaders to set the qualifications for Elders. It is hard to imagine that Paul would set qualifications for one set of Elders *of a different kind* (see below) as regards the managing of one’s household.

The second primary reason for accepting the reading "faithful" over believing is the passage is dealing with a kind of qualification. This consideration is both practical and theological. The other qualifications reference the Elder's abilities or characteristics, not something that is outside himself. A child’s belief is not something that another person is responsible for other than making the truth of the gospel clear through witnessing and prayer. Such a reading would change the kind of qualification presented in this passage.

The Referent of Tekna

The question that remains is the referent of “tekna” (tekna, children). Everyone agrees that this term refers to children. Does it refer to children living in the home or offspring, no matter the age?

According to Louw-Nida, “tekna” is a reference to “one’s immediate offspring, but without specific reference to sex or age.” Paul’s use of the word does little to narrow the focus. Paul even uses this term in a broader sense to refer to his spiritual children. Therefore, again, context determines meaning.

If the argument presented above is accepted, then the answer seems clear. A parent is in the authority role in a child’s life when the child is under their care. This time is when one expects a child to be submissive or "faithful" to a parent. This is before they "leave and cleave" to their spouse. In Jewish thinking, this is when they were responsible for both the rights and regulations of the Law. Joseph Fleishman’s conclusion of his work “The Age of Legal Maturity in Biblical Law” provides some insight:

“...from the analysis of the various Biblical sources and the analogies from the earlier Near Eastern and later rabbinic materials one can conclude that: a) Biblical Law differentiated between the minor and the adult; b) the onset of legal maturity, *legitima betas*, began in the first years of the second decade of a child’s life with the appearance of signs of sexual maturity; but c) only the age of twenty was considered to be the age of full legal maturity, *plena pubertal*.”²

Once a child reached *plena pubertal*, their primary submission was, not to their parents, but the Law. This thinking would likely have been in the thought process of a trained Jewish thinker like Paul.

We may assume the culture may best determine the age when this principle applies. In some cultures, a child is considered an “adult” at 12 years of age while in American culture, perhaps that is the age of majority, age 18.

Conclusion

Given the discussion above, the most reasonable interpretation of Titus 1:6 regarding the children of Elders among the four options presented in the introduction follows: all Elders must have faithful, obedient children while those children are in the household.

This discussion does not solve all the problems in applying this text. The Elders of any church will still have to struggle with the questions:

- 1) what qualifies as “dissipation or rebellion”?
- 2) at what age of the child does this apply?

The recommendation is to focus attention on the proposed Elder’s leadership of his home in setting proper guidelines, disciplines, and conflict management with his children. We obviously would desire all our children not only display faithfulness, but also come to a full belief in Christ.

² Fleishman, Joseph. “The Age of Legal Maturity in Biblical Law.” *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*. June 21, 1992.

Appendix A (to be finalized)

A Survey of the Commentators

The study above was conducted primarily through first sources. A survey of the more popular commentators provides little insight into this discussion. Most of them simply state what they believe the text means with little backing or support. Many do not even acknowledge that various positions regarding the translation and meaning exist. Even the more technical commentaries do not provide much in the way of validation.

Here is a quick reference of some of the commentators who would be in good standing with a conservative evangelical position:

Calvin, John. *Commentaries on The Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR. 2006. P. 293.

Calvin holds that there are three qualifications 1) they must be believers, 2) they must not be devoted to luxury, 3) they shall not be disobedient. He does not validate his view or offer differing views. No comment is made on tekna.

Dibelius, Martin and Conzelmann, Hans. *The Pastoral Epistles*. Hermeneia. Fortress Press, Philadelphia. 1972. P. 132

Deblius and Cozelman state that “pistos” means believing . They do not validate the view or give opposing views. No comment is made on “tekna.”

Fee, Gordon. *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*. *New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusettes, 1992. P. 173.

Fee presents both possible interpretations of “pistos” without stating his position. No comment is made on “tekna.”

Knight, George W. *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. *New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992.

Knight gives a full discussion of the issues with the conclusion that “pistos” likely means “faithful” and “tekna” refers to children still in the home.

MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Titus*. Moody Publishers, 1996.

MacArthur argues that if even one of a man’s children, whether still in the home or as an adult, is not a believer, the man should not be an elder (or pastor). This is a position he has repeated in sermons. He does little to address the options around “tekna” and his treatment of “pistos” suffers from an exegetical fallacy and is less than convincing.

Mounce, William D. *Pastoral Epistles*. Vol. 46. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000.

Mounce gives a full discussion of the issues and the Greek usage without stating a firm decision. His final comment, “A decision is not easy.” He does, however, see “tekna” as children living in the home but does not validate this view.

Oden, Thomas. *First and Second Timothy and Titus. Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. John Knox Press. Louisville.1989. p. 146-147

Oden presents a view that sees, as Calvin, both a qualification of the children being believers and them not being accused of rebellion. He does present the “faithful” view but does not evaluate the two or validate what appears to be his preferred reading.

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The New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982

The NET Bible First Edition. Biblical Studies Press, 2005.

New Revised Standard Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.