

Unbelieving Child and Qualified Elder: A Case for “Faithful” Children in Titus 1:6

1. Introduction

Imagine your pastor’s seventeen-year-old son publicly declaring on social media that he no longer believes the gospel. Must the pastor resign? The answer to this question rests on the interpretation of one word in Titus 1:6 (πιστός). In sum, the debate concerns whether Paul requires elders to have *faithful* children or *believing* children.

Though the KJV translated the requirement as “having faithful children,” there has been what Knight calls a “consistent pattern in recent English translations” towards the view that Paul limited the role of elder to those who had “believing children” (e.g., NASB, ESV, NIV, NRSV, NLT).¹ Since the turn of the millennium, there is a slight movement back towards the “faithful” translation (CSB, LEB, LSB, cf. NET).

Lexicons have leaned toward the “believing” interpretation of Titus 1:6,² and most commentators have followed suit.³ Only a minority of commentators have argued for the “faithful” position.⁴ Considering the significant practical implications of the text, it is surprising there are few focused articles on this passage.⁵

¹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 290.

² Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 821; Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 3:98.

³ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 174–76; Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 132; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: I–II Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 346–47; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 682; Ceslas Spicq, *Saint Paul: les Épîtres pastorales* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1947), 231; Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 184; I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 157–58; Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 173; Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), 146; Homer A. Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 213; Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary and an Introduction to Titus, I and II Timothy, the Pastoral Epistles*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 76; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 231; Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 281; C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles in the New English Bible*, New Clarendon Bible (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 129; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 2000), 388–89; Raymond F. Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 321; Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 481.

⁴ Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 289–90; Philip Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 225; Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 1924; Aida Besançon Spencer, *2 Timothy and Titus*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Craig S. Keener, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 13–17; John A. Kitchen, *The Pastoral Epistles for Pastors* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2018), 491; James D. G. Dunn, “1 & 2 Timothy; Titus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Second Corinthians - Philemon*, ed. J. Paul Sampley et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 864; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 341. Note that Towner is in both lists. His earlier commentary supported the “faithful” interpretation, while his latter supported the “believing” interpretation.

⁵ Norris C. Grubbs, “The Truth about Elders and Their Children: Believing or Behaving in Titus 1:6?,” *Faith and Mission* 22, no. 2 (2005): 3–15; Robert S. Rayburn and Steven A. Nicoletti, “An Elder Must Have Believing Children: Titus 1:6 and a Neglected Case of Conscience,” *Presbyterian* 43, no. 2 (2017): 69–80.

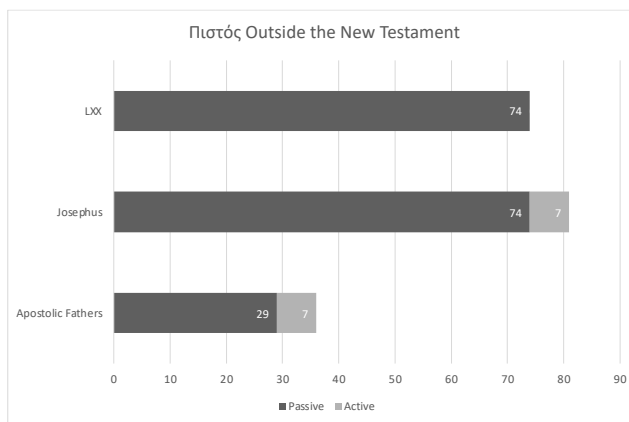
As anyone who has experienced something like the scenario that opened this essay can attest, this debate is more than academic. Its practical application affects elders, their families, and the whole church. Of course, elders must consider what is their own moral responsibility and fitness for ministry. But congregants, as well, must consider the proper standard for leadership within their own assembly. A debate of this nature is best considered prior to the emotional turmoil of a particular situation, where one might be concerned that circumstances may be unduly influencing one’s interpretation.

This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature by building a case for the “faithful” interpretation. I will examine lexical, contextual, theological, and practical reasons to affirm this interpretation.

2. Lexical Arguments

There is an active and passive sense to πιστός. In its active sense, it can be translated, “trusting [in]” or “believing [in].”⁶ In its passive sense, it can be translated, “faithful,” “trustworthy,” “dependable,” or “obedient.”⁷ In essence, the debate in Titus 1:6 concerns whether it is best to translate the word in its active or passive sense.

Norris Grubbs conducted a detailed study of πιστός from the LXX through the Apostolic Fathers.⁸ His findings show that the LXX used the word seventy-four times, exclusively in the passive sense to refer to faithfulness. Josephus used it eighty-one times, only seven in the active sense of believing, and the vast majority (seventy-four times) in the passive sense. The Apostolic Fathers used it thirty-six times, with twenty-nine being clearly passive, four being ambiguous, and three active uses. Thus, the predominant usage outside the New Testament is the passive sense.⁹



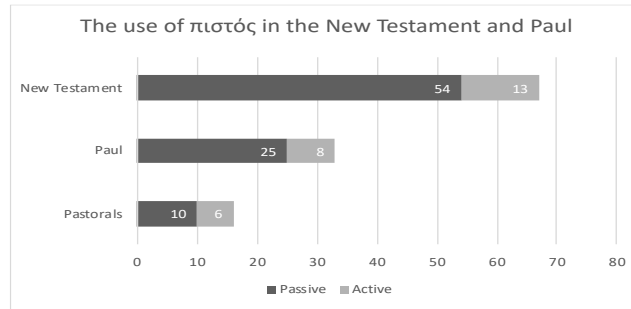
⁶ Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 3:759.

⁷ Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 820. The translation “obedient” is debated. Marshall believes πιστός is *not* equivalent to “obedient” (Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 158), but nearly all lexicons give this as a gloss, including the two most recent: James Diggle et al., eds., *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2:1135; Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, ed. Madeleine Goh and Chad Schroeder (Boston: Brill, 2015), 1669; Hermann Cremer and William Urwick, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, 4th Eng. Ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 476; Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (London: Simon Wallenberg Press, 2007), 1408; Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 6:175.

⁸ Grubbs, “The Truth about Elders and Their Children.”

⁹ These findings are confirmed in the *EDNT* which notes that “faithful in the sense of dependable” is “the meaning predominant in non-Christian usage.” Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:97.

The New Testament uses are also predominantly passive. The word is used sixty-seven times, with fifty-four passive and thirteen active uses. Paul specifically uses the word thirty-three times, with twenty-five passive and eight active uses. In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul uses the word seventeen times. If we exclude the use under consideration in this paper, Paul used the passive sense ten times, leaving six active uses. The book of Titus has only three uses, two of which are unambiguously passive (1:9; 3:8), and the other is the point of debate in this paper.



These findings indicate that the passive sense was the predominant meaning historically, yet there is a clear increase in the usage of the active meaning in the New Testament. Nevertheless, even then the passive meaning was the predominant usage. Paul certainly used the word in the active sense, especially within the Pastorals. Nevertheless, in Titus itself, he only uses it three times, and the two not under discussion here are unambiguously passive in meaning.

Of course, statistical analysis can only get us so far. It has established that Paul used the word in both its active and passive senses. Is there anything else that can help us determine the use in Titus 1:6? A few interpreters have argued that the meaning of the word πιστός in Titus 1:6 must be referring to believers, even if it is translated “faithful.” This is because the only way one could be faithful is by being a believer.

This argument purports to rest on the lexical meaning of the word in Scripture. Rayburn and Nicoletti indicate that “No use of the adjective ‘faithful’ in Paul or the rest of the New Testament suggests that Paul would employ it with respect to unrepentant, unbelieving children of Christian parents.”¹⁰ MacArthur adds that πιστός is always “used of people whom the context clearly identifies as believers . . . Unbelievers are never referred to as faithful.”¹¹

There are two responses that can be made to this argument. First, it appears that MacArthur, Rayburn, and Nicoletti have illegitimately expanded the semantic range of the word πιστός in light of the English word “faithful.” While it is true that we may not today call an unbelieving son of an elder a “faithful son,” that has little to do with whether the word πιστός in Paul’s day could refer to a son who fulfills his household obligations of obedience, even if he is not a believer. In fact, Grubbs has argued that πιστός “normally means faithful in the sense of reliable, consistent, or dependable without any added requirement of being a believer.”¹² It is only during the post-apostolic period that the word begins to have this further implication of belief.¹³

There is a good reason to believe the word πιστός referred to a dependable and subservient member of a household, whether believer or not. The word is used throughout the Gospels to refer to servants in a

¹⁰ Rayburn and Nicoletti, “An Elder Must Have Believing Children,” 71.

¹¹ John MacArthur, *Titus*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 30.

¹² Grubbs, “The Truth about Elders and Their Children,” 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6, 8.

household who were found to be faithful in their obligations (Mt 24:45; 25:21, 23; Lk 12:42; 16:10; 19:17). In 1 Corinthians 4:2 Paul made a gnomic statement: “it is required that stewards be found faithful.” Did Paul mean “it is required that a steward be found believing and thus faithful”? Clearly not. Instead, it seems clear that the word πιστός can refer to a subservient member of a household performing his or her duties well, regardless of whether they believe the gospel. Knight suggests the same as he comments on Titus 1:6: “πιστός here means ‘faithful’ in the sense of ‘submissive’ or ‘obedient,’ as a servant or steward is regarded as πιστός when he carries out the requests of his master.”¹⁴

In the ancient world, the father was the head of the household. The wife, slaves, and children were to be subject to his command.¹⁵ Such subservients would be described as πιστός to the degree that they were obedient within that role. MacArthur argues that unbelief would be disobedience,¹⁶ but such an argument only follows if belief can be commanded. This issue will be addressed below as we consider the theological reasons to maintain the “faithful” interpretation.

In sum, the lexical case is that the predominant usage throughout the New Testament, including Titus itself, is the passive interpretation. Further, since the passage is referring to roles within a household, it is likely that the word should be translated within that domain. What is required of subservient members of the household is that they be “faithful,” i.e., compliant and in submission to the head of the household. Accordingly, that is the most likely interpretation here.

3. Contextual Arguments

Words are never to be read in isolation. Accordingly, no study is complete without adding to the lexical data contextual data. In this section we will examine the literary and historical context that support the “faithful” interpretation.

The immediate literary context in which 1:6 is found is the consideration of requirements for elders. In verse 5, Paul indicates the reason he left Titus in Crete; so that Titus would organize the churches and appoint elders. Verses 6–9 then describe what type of men should be appointed to the role of elder. The overarching qualification is that they be “above reproach” (ἀνέγκλητος). That Paul saw this as primary is indicated both in that it heads the qualifications and that it is repeated (v. 7).

To be above reproach meant that one was not liable to accusations that would stick. Though the word can refer to moral perfection (1 Cor 1:8; Col 1:22), the use here is like that of 1 Timothy 3:10, where Paul noted that deacons “must first be tested; and then if there is *nothing against them* (ἀνέγκλητοι), let them serve as deacons.” The standard is not perfection, but a credible public testimony of moral virtue. The leaders of a holy assembly should themselves be holy.

Following this broad standard, Paul gave two qualifications having to do with one’s family. The first indicated the need for the man to be committed to one woman—his wife.¹⁷ The second concerned the need for the man to have children who are subservient. The focus on home life is unsurprising when one recognizes that Paul considers the church of God to be a family (cf. 1 Tim. 5:1–2). If a man cannot

¹⁴ Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 290.

¹⁵ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 238.

¹⁶ “In an elder’s home, especially, a child who is old enough to be saved, but is not, can hardly be considered faithful. He would be unfaithful in by far the most important way.” MacArthur, *Titus*, 30.

¹⁷ There is significant debate concerning the meaning of the phrase “a one-woman-man.” Whether the present interpretation is taken or one of the other major interpretations, the result is inconsequential for the present topic.

succeed with his own family (by garnering their respect), then how could he hope to successfully lead a larger family, the church?

That Paul had in mind a manager of God's household is clear from verse seven: "Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be above reproach." Such a connection strengthens the lexical case for πιστός being interpreted within the domestic household context (especially since verse six is connected to seven by the conjunction γαρ). What follows is a list of five character qualities that must be avoided and six qualities that must be evident. Verse nine concludes the section by adding one additional requirement: the man must hold fast to the word of life so that he may use it to strengthen the church and refute those who wander from its truth.

Having worked through a brief exegesis of the passage, we see that "Faithful" is better situated within this context than "believing." The reason for this concerns the nature of the requirements. Every requirement is a character assessment. Even having "faithful" children is a character assessment, for it is a gauge whether one is able to gain the respect and obedience of those under his care. If, however, it were a requirement that he have believing children, this would be the only element within this entire list that rests outside the control of the potential elder.

A second reason the immediate context suggests the "faithful" interpretation rests on the words that directly follow the debated requirement. Paul indicates that the elder must have children who are "not open to the charge of wildness or rebellion." Some English translations add an "and" between πιστός and this phrase (children must be believers *and* not open to the charge. . .).¹⁸ In the Greek, no such conjunction exists. Accordingly, it is much better to see the two descriptors as explaining the nature of πιστός.

<p>τέκνα ἔχων πιστά, having faithful children μὴ ἐν κατηγορίᾳ ἀσωτίας not open to the charge of wildness ἢ ἀνυπότακτα or [open to the charge of] rebellion</p>
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As Smith notes, these phrases "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."¹⁹

Further, that these phrases describe what it means to be "faithful" makes good sense. Such a command is somewhat vague. By noting that "faithful" children are not wild or in rebellion against their father's authority, Paul gives specifics concerning what would disqualify a potential elder. However, if the requirement were that the children be believers, the two additional phrases appear redundant. This is because anyone who is open to the charge of wildness or rebellion (two words used elsewhere to refer to

¹⁸ Liefield draws attention to this in the NIV: "The NIV inserts an unwarranted 'and' between 'believing' and 'are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient,' as though the latter were an additional requirement. Instead, the second phrase enlarges on the meaning of that previous word." Walter L. Liefield, *1 and 2 Timothy/Titus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 313.

¹⁹ Kevin G. Smith, "Family Requirements for Eldership," *Conspectus* 1 (March 2006): 38.

egregious evil)²⁰ demonstrate by such actions that they have no credible claim to the title, believer (cf. 1 Cor 6:9).

A third contextual argument for the “faithful” interpretation rests on the purpose of the letter. According to Fee, the dominant theme of Titus concerns “good works with exemplary behavior, with a concern for what outsiders think.”²¹ Smith agrees, noting that the “entire ethical concern of the letter is with observable behaviour that affects the church’s reputation with outsiders.”²² In the ancient world, it was expected that the leader of a household keep his house in order.²³ The reputation of the church would be greatly harmed by placing in leadership a man who was unable to lead his own family well. Accordingly, Paul’s admonition for “faithful” children fits quite well within the overall framework of the letter.²⁴

A final literary-contextual argument reaches beyond the book of Titus to the parallel requirements given in 1 Timothy. The significant overlap of these books, especially in consideration of the requirements of elders, suggest that they were written at approximately the same time.²⁵ Yet as Grubbs rightly recognizes, “the implications of the parallel nature of these two passages upon the meaning of *πιστῶν* in Titus 1:6 are often missed.”²⁶ In 1 Timothy, the requirement of the elder is that “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him.” If the standard in Titus were to have “believing” children, then Paul would have a stronger standard in Crete than in Ephesus.

If there were a different standard between Crete and Ephesus, one would expect the more lenient to go towards Crete, for it was the more recent work.²⁷ Many have suggested that Paul did not include the prohibition against new converts in Crete because all the potential elders would have been relatively new converts (1 Tim 3:6).²⁸ If the potential elders were relatively new converts, then it would seem unreasonable to require their children to also be believers, as they may not have had sufficient time to evangelize and teach their children the new way of faith.²⁹

The parallel passage in 1 Timothy also suggests another reason to maintain the “faithful interpretation.” In 1 Timothy, Paul is more explicit concerning why he includes the family requirements: “If anyone does not

²⁰ The two other New Testament uses of “wildness” (*ἄσωτια*) refer to excessive wild living including drunkenness and orgies (Eph 5:18; 1 Pet 4:4). As for “rebellion” (*ἀνυποκοπιτως*) Paul uses it in 1 Timothy 1:9–10, where he indicates that the law is made for those in *rebellion*; that is, it is for “the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers.”

²¹ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 173.

²² Smith, “Family Requirements for Eldership,” 38.

²³ Jeffers, *Graeco-Roman World*, 243.

²⁴ Those holding to the “believing” view would likely use a similar argument, noting that it was expected in the Graeco-Roman world that children in a family follow the religious views of their parents. We will address this point below in the theological section, where we will note that Christianity was counter-cultural in this regard.

²⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lxii.

²⁶ Grubbs, “The Truth about Elders and Their Children,” 13.

²⁷ Towner turns this on its head, arguing that the more difficult context (Crete) would require the more stringent guideline. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 682.

²⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul’s Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New Testament in Context (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 223; Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 112. Though see Merkle, who rejects this interpretation. Benjamin L. Merkle, “Are the Qualifications for Elders or Overseers Negotiable?,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171, no. 682 (April 2014): 185–86.

²⁹ Köstenberger likewise wonders how “new churches could have had enough men with converted children.” Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, 314. Grubbs recognizes that there are household conversions, and so this could be the requirement here (i.e., the potential elder is a man who God blessed with saving his whole family at once or at least quickly). Grubbs, “The Truth about Elders and Their Children,” 12.

know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” Transferring this motivation into Titus (which is legitimate, since Paul in Titus calls the elder a steward of God’s house [1:7]), we see that Paul’s concern is for the proper order and structure of the family. Within this context, “faithful” fits seamlessly.

In sum, the context provides four arguments for the “faithful” interpretation. Most of these arguments do not exclude the “believing” interpretation, but they show that the “faithful” interpretation fits the context better. First, the requirements for an elder are dominantly character assessments, and the “faithful” interpretation fits naturally within that categorization. Second, the semantics of verse 6 suggest that the words following πιστός are meant to further explain the meaning of πιστός. Third, the purpose of the letter (act virtuously with a concern for the view of outsiders) comports exceptionally well with the “faithful” interpretation. Finally, the parallel with 1 Timothy strongly suggests that Paul meant in Titus what he clearly says in Timothy. In this case the clearer should help us understand the opaque.

4. Theological Arguments

Theology, at its best, is a product of the proper exegesis of Scripture. It is a broad assessment of what the fulness of Scripture teaches about God, man, and creation. As such, theological arguments are the broadest contextual arguments that can be made. Three theological arguments may be marshalled for the “faithful” view. The first has to do with the Graeco-Roman religious custom and the Christian theological response. The second has to do with how one can square the “believing” interpretation with the classic doctrine of election. The final argument rests on the theological claim that fathers have two distinct responsibilities towards their children: to evangelize them and to make them good citizens.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the “believing” view concerns a custom in the Graeco-Roman world. In that context, it was expected that the subordinates in a family take the religion of the head of the household.³⁰ Accordingly, some argue that because the potential elder was the head of his household, the children should be expected to believe. If they refused to do so, they were rebelling against his authority.³¹

While it is true that the Graeco-Roman world held to this custom, Christianity was anti-cultural in this regard. Wives, for instance, were not required to follow the religion of their husbands; instead, by living submissively they were to ornament the gospel with the hope that their husbands might be drawn to Christ (1 Pet 3:1–2). Likewise, slaves were not told to embrace their master’s gods, but they were told to live in submission as far as they were able (Eph 6:5–8). In both of these circumstances, Scripture provides meaningful autonomy in the religious sphere for those in subordinate positions within the household.

The Christian doctrine of salvation is responsible for this counter-cultural position, for according to Christian theology, each person relates directly to God (John 3:16, 36; Acts 2:38; Rom 10:9–10). There is little reason to believe this would not apply to children within the household as well. And once this doctrinal point is accepted, to compel children to believe would be to compel hypocrisy.

Christian theology not only provides a robust answer to the strongest argument for the “believing” position, but it also provides one of the strongest arguments against the “believing” interpretation. In sum,

³⁰ Robert W. Wall and Richard B. Steele, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, Two Horizons (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 341; Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 682–83.

³¹ Smith, based on this custom, argues that the best interpretation of πιστός is “faithful” because “believing” would already be implied. Smith, “Family Requirements for Eldership,” 37–38.

the “believing” position cannot square with the doctrine of election.³² By election, I mean the unilateral choice of God to choose some to salvation (Eph 1:3–11). There are numerous problems with holding the “believing” position while holding to a doctrine of election.

First, the potential elder is held to an impossible standard.³³ His child must believe (if he is to be qualified for ministry), yet he has no direct control over whether his child will believe. Two answers have been given to this problem. The first comes from MacArthur, who believes that those who see a tension between the “believing” view and election have a “defective understanding of God’s sovereign election.”³⁴ He continues, “Some interpreters argue that Paul could not possibly hold a man responsible for the failure of his children to be saved if God has not elected them. But that sort of thinking is unbiblical. Scriptural predestination is not fatalism or determinism.”³⁵

MacArthur does not sufficiently clarify this point, but it appears that his point rests on an analogy: If a man has true guilt even when he is not elect (and thus having liability without ability), then a father can have true guilt for not converting his non-elect children (again having liability without ability). But the two are not equivalent. Regarding non-elect people, there is a true basis for guilt both in the inherited sin of Adam and in their own sinful acts which hinder them from believing. On the other hand, Scripture does not indicate that the salvation of children is the parent’s responsibility.³⁶ In sum, the liability of the non-elect is clearly taught in Scripture, while the liability of the parent whose children do not believe is certainly not clearly taught in Scripture.

The other response to the tension is to simply embrace the standard, noting that though the father has no direct control over the election of the child, nevertheless only those who have believing children may be in this position of church leadership.³⁷ While this position is logical, it fails to provide any form of actual assessment of the potential elder.

This leads us to the second problem with holding “believing” and the doctrine of election—it provides no assessment of the elder himself. As Liefeld notes, “Good and wise parents can influence their children’s actions and encourage them to be trustworthy, but they cannot control their spiritual response to God.”³⁸ Within a passage devoted to assessments to a man’s character, one would expect that this requirement would measure the character or aptitude of a man. The “faithful” interpretation provides such an assessment, but the “believing” does not. Simply put, terrible fathers sometimes have believing children, but they rarely have obedient children. Great fathers sometimes have believing children, but they frequently have obedient children. If we are to assess a man’s qualification by his children, which is the more logical choice—the thing he has control over or that which he does not?

³² Some who read this may reject the historic formulation of the doctrine of election. But even those who hold to man’s libertarian free will should object to the “believing” position on the basis that the child has freedom to choose whether to believe or not to believe.

³³ Strauch notes that some interpreters “place an impossible burden upon a father. Even the best Christian fathers cannot guarantee that their children will believe. Salvation is a supernatural act of God. God, not good parents (although they are certainly used of God), ultimately brings salvation.” Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, Rev. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 229.

³⁴ MacArthur, *Titus*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Of course, some might argue that the text under consideration argues for the parent’s liability in regard to the salvation of their children. Seen in this light, the present argument is begging the question. Nevertheless, the point stands that nowhere else in Scripture does guilt accrue to parents whose children do not believe. Accordingly, it is not the likely interpretation here.

³⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 389.

³⁸ Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy/Titus*, 313.

	Elect?	Obedient?
Great Fathers	Sometimes	Frequently
Terrible Fathers	Sometimes	Rarely
	Non-Assessable	Assessable

A third problem with the connection between “believing” and the doctrine of election concerns the history of God’s people. If there were a connection between the faithfulness of a man and the election of his children, one would expect that some of the most faithful men of the Old Testament would have elect children. Consider, however, David and his family. Or think of Samuel and his sons. Hezekiah would provide a third example with his son Manasseh (before his repentance; 2 Chron 33:10–13). These three men receive some of the most exalted language in all the Old Testament (1 Sam 12:4–5; 13:14; 2 Kings 18:5), yet their children were not believers.

A final tension between the “believing” interpretation and election is that when held together, they appear to lay the blame of the child on the father. Yarbrough, who ultimately takes the “believing” interpretation nevertheless suggests that the interpretation may not be easily squared with Ezekiel 18:20a: “The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child.”³⁹ If the child receives an abundance of instruction and is thoroughly evangelized and yet decides to reject Christian truth, how can the parent be hold guilt for the child’s choice?⁴⁰

The third theological argument for the “faithful” interpretation rests on the doctrine of the two-kingdoms.⁴¹ According to this historic doctrine, there are redemptive-directed moral duties and earthly-directed moral duties. In regard to the redemptive, fathers are to evangelize their children. They have no real control over this realm, but they pray that their faithfulness in act and prayer will be used by the Lord to bring about their child’s conversion. In regard to the earthly sphere, fathers are to diligently make their children good citizens. They do have significant control over this realm, though it may be limited to the time the children are under their direct control.

This approach to Christian ethics comports well with the “faithful” interpretation. What is being assessed by the church concerning the elder is that which he has been given control over. Is he capable of leading his family in such a way that his children respect and follow him? If not, then how could he lead the church of God? But if a man has been found a good steward in this smaller arena, then he may find success in the larger endeavor.

³⁹ Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 483.

⁴⁰ Certainly, some might argue that the elder holds no guilt, yet it still incapable of holding the office. The tension with this interpretation is that all the surrounding requirements, if not met, imply guilt.

⁴¹ In sum, the two-kingdom doctrine argues that though Jesus rules over all, He rules over two realms differently. In the words, of Jacobs, “On the one hand, Jesus rules over the common kingdom—the created order common to all life that will one day come to an end—as creator and sustainer. On the other hand, Jesus rules over the redemptive kingdom—the church and those called to consummation into the world to come at the end of the current age—as redeemer and savior” (Michael N. Jacobs, “The Resurgence of the Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Survey of the Literature,” *Themelios* 45 (2020): 314). In regard to the household, the father has responsibilities with regard to both kingdoms. He must attempt, as far as he is able, to make good citizens for the earthly kingdom, while evangelizing his children with the hope that they would join him in partaking of the redemptive kingdom. For more on the two-kingdom approach, see David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

In sum, Christian theology supports the “faithful” interpretation. The doctrine of individual salvation negates the cultural argument that children must embrace the religion of their parents. Further, the doctrine of election resides in considerable tension with the “believing” view yet rests peacefully within the “faithful” view. Finally, the two-kingdom view of Christian ethics comports well with Paul’s requirement that church elders have “faithful” children.

5. Practical Arguments

In addition to the lexical, contextual, and theological arguments given above, there are numerous practical arguments in favor of the “faithful” interpretation.

Both interpretations create some challenges for implementation. For instance, if we accept the “faithful” interpretation, two primary questions arise. First, how disobedient does a child have to be for the pastor to be disqualified? This question is difficult, though the egregious nature of the sins listed in verse six suggest that the sinful rebellion must be both significant morally and evident publicly. Second, should the church assess the life of a child only while they are in the home or also after they leave the home? The language of the passage appears ambiguous on this question. Nevertheless, if the context suggests a household stewardship (as we have argued above), then it is logical to conclude such responsibility when the child leaves the home.⁴²

On the other hand, the questions that arise when we accept the “believer” interpretation are even more challenging. First, how old does a child have to be before he professes faith? If an elder’s child is seven and has not made a profession of faith, is the elder still qualified? What if the child is eleven or thirteen? Second, what should a pastor do when his child consistently doubts his salvation? Third, does the command reflect only children in the home or also children who have grown up and started their own homes?

In regard to the age of the child, many interpreters take the passage to mean only children in the home.⁴³ But as MacArthur points out, the word used of children “refers to offspring of any age.”⁴⁴ Supporting this is the fact that the sins referenced in 1:6 do not seem to be the types of activities done by small children. Perhaps then one may assess the adult character of a potential elder’s children. Mounce suggests that this is appropriate, for though the elder taught them in the home “the results of which can be seen in his children wherever they live.”⁴⁵ Rayburn and Nicoletti agree, noting that “while the primary scope of the text appears to be adolescent children still in the home . . . the text does have secondary implications that would call on us to also consider the faith of a man’s adult children as a possible indication of his fitness to serve as an elder.”⁴⁶

Assessing the elder’s adult children brings in added challenges. First, is a seventy-year-old man disqualified if, after forty years of pastoring, his fifty-year-old son, to the surprise of all, apostatizes from the faith? Second, if adult children can be a means of assessment, one wonders whether a man converted as an adult can lack qualification for ministry because his adult sons are not believers. In this case, he would not have

⁴² This fact is complicated by the recognition that in the Graeco-Roman world, the authority of the Father was not limited to the household, for “even though the younger generation lived under a different roof, they were still under the legal authority of their father as *paterfamilias*” (Jeffers, *Graeco-Roman World*, 239). Of course, this raises the question concerning how much the cultural situation should influence our understanding of the elder’s requirements. For more on this question we cannot develop here, see Merkle, “Are the Qualifications for Elders or Overseers Negotiable?”

⁴³ Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 176; Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 289.

⁴⁴ MacArthur, *Titus*, 30.

⁴⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 388.

⁴⁶ Rayburn and Nicoletti, “An Elder Must Have Believing Children,” 74–75.

had opportunity to share the word with them when they were young. Is he incapable of elder ministry on this account?

This practical section has sought to work through the implications of both readings. Though this cannot be our primary interpretive measure, it is logically a helpful measure. This is another way of saying that we should give priority to readings that do not create extra levels of complication. In this case, the reading “faithful” is much simpler to apply and creates fewer challenges than the “believer” interpretation. When this fact is added to the above argumentation, the “faithful” interpretation gains extra strength.

6. Conclusion

The question addressed in this article is one that has been faced by numerous churches, and it will likely face many more: Does Scripture require that an elder have “faithful” or “believing” children?

This article has argued that the “faithful” interpretation was Paul’s meaning. First, it is the expected definition of the word both statistically and within the household domain (lexical case). Second, it fits the context better than the alternative (contextual case). Third, the doctrinal case for the “faithful” interpretation is compelling, while the implications of the “believing” interpretation are theologically challenging (theological case). Finally, the “faithful” interpretation raises few applicational challenges, while the “believing” interpretation causes more applicational problems than it solves.