

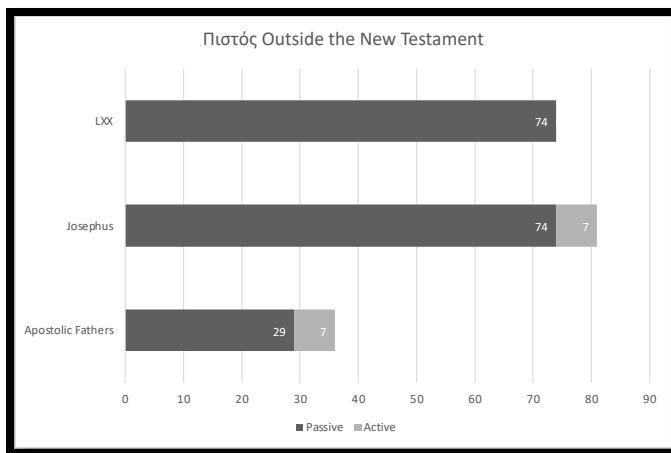
# THE ETHICAL REQUIREMENT OF A PASTOR: MUST HE HAVE BELIEVING CHILDREN?

## I. Introduction

- A. Imagine your pastor's 17-year-old son announcing that he does not believe the Gospel. Is your pastor qualified to shepherd?
- B. The answer to this question is complex and depends, in large part, on the interpretation of Titus 1:6. There are two major translations of this text:
  - 1. "An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, *a man whose children believe* and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (NIV; cf. NASB, ESV, NRSV, NLT).
  - 2. "An elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, *with faithful children* who are not accused of wildness or rebellion" (CSB; cf. LEB, LSB).
- C. The interpretation difference is the translation of one Greek word (πιστός).
- D. The debate is deeply practical.
  - 1. Men have been removed from ministry because their children were not believers.
  - 2. The time to consider the right interpretation is not during the situation, but prior to it.
- E. This presentation is a defense of the view that "faithful" is the correct translation. I will argue this on the basis of the lexical, contextual, theological, and practical vantage points

## II. The Lexical Case

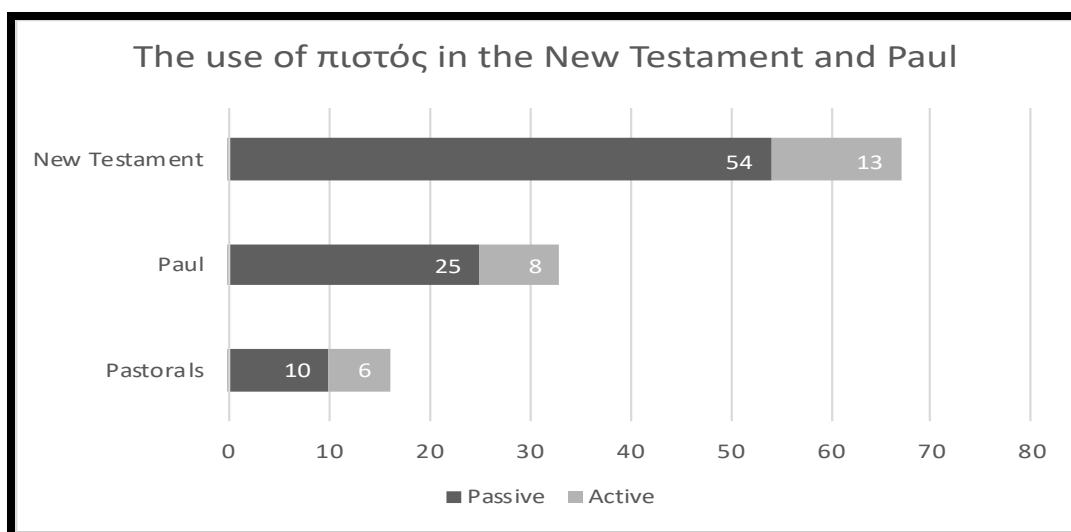
- A. There is an active and passive sense to πιστός. In its active sense, it can be translated, "trusting [in]" or "believing [in]."<sup>1</sup> In its passive sense, it can be translated, "faithful," "trustworthy," "dependable," or "obedient."<sup>2</sup> In essence, the debate in Titus 1:6 concerns whether it is best to translate the word in its active or passive sense.
- B. The LXX



<sup>1</sup> Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 3:759.

<sup>2</sup> Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 820. 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.

## C. The NT



## D. Pastoral Epistles

1. The word was used seventeen times.
2. The following provides every use, showing that Paul used the word eleven times in the passive sense (accepting that Titus 1:6 is passive) and six times in the active.
3. Significantly, there are only three uses of the word in Titus and the other two are clearly passive (i.e., “faithful”).

### a. Active Uses

- 1) 1 Tim 4:3 They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude by those who **believe** and know the truth.
- 2) 1 Tim 4:10 For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who **believe**.
- 3) 1 Tim 4:12 Don’t let anyone despise your youth, but set an example for the **believers** in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.
- 4) 1 Tim 5:16 If any **believing** woman has widows in her family, let her help them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it can help widows in genuine need.
- 5) 1 Tim 6:2 (x2) Let those who have **believing** masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brothers, but serve them even better, since those who benefit from their service are **believers** and dearly loved. Teach and encourage these things.

### b. Passive Uses

- 1) 1 Tim 1:12 I give thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me, because he considered me **faithful**, appointing me to the ministry—
- 2) 1 Tim 1:15 This saying is **trustworthy** and deserving of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them.
- 3) 1 Tim 3:1 This saying is **trustworthy**: “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work.”
- 4) 1 Tim 3:11 Wives, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, **faithful** in everything.
- 5) 1 Tim 4:9 This saying is **trustworthy** and deserves full acceptance.

- 6) 2 Tim 2:2 What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to **faithful** men who will be able to teach others also.
- 7) 2 Tim 2:11 This saying is **trustworthy**: For if we died with him, we will also live with him;
- 8) 2 Tim 2:13 If we are faithless, he remains **faithful**, for he cannot deny himself.
- 9) Titus 1:9 holding to the **faithful** message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it.
- 10) Titus 3:8 This saying is **trustworthy**. I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed God might be careful to devote themselves to good works. These are good and profitable for everyone.

c. Debated Uses

- 1) Titus 1:6 An elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, with **faithful** children who are not accused of wildness or rebellion.
- 2) 2 Tim 2:22 above might also be debated as to its meaning. But in regard to the context, it by implication means both faithful and believing.

E. Conclusions from lexical Study

1. The predominant use was passive (“faithful”); however, as time progressed, the active use was becoming more common. By the time of the Pastoral Epistles, the word was still dominantly used in the passive, but the active is possible.
2. Unfortunately, lexical analysis does not work in a particular passage; it may give us probabilities, but we seek after certainty.

F. Answering an Argument

1. Before turning from the Lexical analysis, we should consider an argument made by some in the “believing” camp; namely, one cannot be “faithful” without being a believer.
  - a. Nicoletti and Rayburn: “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.”<sup>3</sup>
  - b. MacArthur adds that πιστός is always “used of people whom the context clearly identifies as believers . . . Unbelievers are never referred to as faithful.”<sup>4</sup>
2. As noted in 2 Tim 2:22 above, this argument works in some contexts; yet in others it does not.
3. Specifically, the question concerns the meaning of the Greek word πιστός, not the English meaning of the word “faithful.” To suggest the former means what the latter means is an exegetical fallacy.<sup>5</sup>
4. More specifically, there is a way the word is used in the NT that comports well with Titus 1:6 but does not require “believing” as an addendum.
  - a. The word is used throughout the Gospels to refer to servants in a household who were found to be faithful in their obligations (Mt 24:45; 25:21, 23; Lk 12:42; 16:10; 19:17).
  - b. In 1 Corinthians 4:2 Paul made a gnomic statement: “it is required that stewards be found **faithful**.”

<sup>3</sup> Rayburn and Nicoletti, “An Elder Must Have Believing Children,” 71.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *Titus*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Grubbs has argued that πιστός “normally means faithful in the sense of reliable, consistent, or dependable without any added requirement of being a believer.” It is only during the post-apostolic period that the word begins to have this further implication of belief (Grubbs, “The Truth about Elders and Their Children,” 6, 8).

- c. Knight highlights the way this understanding effects our interpretation of Titus 1:6: “πιστά 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.”<sup>6</sup>
- G. Summary: 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.

### III. The Contextual Case

- A. First Argument: The Broad Context Suggests Character Within the Control of the Elder
  - 1. This text is situated within Paul’s consideration of the qualifications of an elder. The chief qualification is that the elder be “above reproach” or “blameless” (1:6, 7)
  - 2. What follows is a list of qualifications that are within the control of the elder—i.e., unless it refers to “believing” children.
  - 3. “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.
- B. Second Argument: The Grammar of the Passage Suggests the “Faithful” Interpretation

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

- 1. The grammar suggests that the two phrases that follow πιστά explain the meaning of the word.
  - 2. Some English translations add a conjunction to make sense of the passage: “children must be believers *and* not open to the charge . . . ”
  - 3. It is much better to see these clauses as describing the nature of what it means to be “faithful”; indeed, this is precisely what we would expect if he meant “faithful, but the addition of the phrases makes little sense on the “believer” interpretation.<sup>7</sup>
- C. Third Argument: The Parallel Passage in 1 Timothy Supports the “Faithful Interpretation”
  - 1. The 1 Timothy requirement is that the elder “must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him” (1 Tim 3:4).
  - 2. The word for obey (ὑποταγή) is different than πιστά, though one would expect that they would mean the same thing.
  - 3. 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.

<sup>6</sup> Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 290.

<sup>7</sup> This is because the two sins listed following the clause are deeply egregious sins elsewhere mentioned in the Scripture; accordingly, one would think if they are doing these things, they are not truly believers. The two other New Testament uses of “wildness” (ἀσωτία) refer to excessive wild living including drunkenness and orgies (Eph 5:18; 1 Pet 4:4). As for “rebellion” (ἀνυποκρίτως) 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.”

4. 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 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.
- D. Summary of the Contextual Case: “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. Finally, the parallel with 1 Timothy strongly suggests that Paul meant in Titus what he clearly says in Timothy.

#### IV. The Theological Case

- A. Greco–Roman Customs Were Overturned by Christianity
1. Perhaps the strongest argument for the “believing” view is that G–R cultures were patriarchal. The father of the household compelled all in his house to believe and act in accordance with his direction.
  2. The NT, however, does not follow this custom. It allows wives to be free from the religion of their husbands (1 Pet 3:1–2), and for slaves to submit to Christ (Eph 6:5–8).
  3. 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).
  4. Once this is understood, the argument for the “believing” position is neutered, and the suggestion that one could compel belief in their children becomes an invitation to hypocrisy.
- B. The Doctrine of Election does not Comport with the “Believing” Interpretation<sup>8</sup>
1. According to a Calvinistic view of election, it is God’s unilateral work that brings about the salvation of the child.
  2. The first tension: The elder has no control over this yet is held responsible for it. He is not “blameless” if his children do not believe.
    - a. MacArthur argues that those who see the problem as I do have a “defective understanding of God’s sovereign election.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>
    - b. 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Even those who deny a Calvinistic interpretation of election should deny the “believing” view as it rejects the autonomy of the child.

<sup>9</sup> MacArthur, *Titus*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

3. The second tension: on the doctrine of election, the requirement of “believing children” does not assess the elder.
  - a. Within a passage devoted to assessments of 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.

	Elect?	Obedient?
Great Fathers	Sometimes	Frequently
Terrible Fathers	Sometimes	Rarely
	<b>Non-Assessable</b>	<b>Assessable</b>

4. The third tension: The best OT saints often had unbelieving children (David, Samuel, Hezekiah, etc.)
  5. The Final tension: The believing view suggests *guilt* for the parent because of the choice of their children in contradiction to 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.”
- C. The Doctrine of the Two–Kingdoms<sup>12</sup> suggests two Domains of Parental Responsibility
1. According to this historic doctrine, there are redemptive-directed moral duties and earthly-directed moral duties.
  2. 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.
  3. The “believing” position disregards this distinction, while the “faithful” position comports well with it.
- D. Conclusion to the Theological Case: 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.

## V. The Practical Case

- A. There are innumerable practical problems with working out the requirement if we take the “believing” interpretation.
  1. How old are the children being assessed?
    - a. MacArthur, Nicoletti, Rayburn, and Mounce argue that it pertains not only to children in the home, but also children outside the home, for their direction was set by their time in the home.

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

- b. Could the apostasy of a forty-year-old man disqualify his father who has pastored for forty years?
- 2. Could an adult-converted man be an elder?
  - a. If his children have to be believers, then someone who was converted after his children left the home is in a difficult spot.
  - b. This seems problematic.
- 3. How old does a child have to be before becoming a believer?
- 4. What if a child consistently doubts his faith?
- 5. What if a child, who was obedient, discovers at college they were not saved? Was the pastor unqualified during the previous years?
- B. Of course, there are some difficulties on the “faithful side” though much less problematic.
  - 1. How disobedient does a child have to be before the pastor is disqualified?
  - 2. Should we assess the adult children of an elder?

## **VI. Conclusion**

- A. The question addressed in this presentation 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?
- B. This presentation 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 (practical case).