

Some Challenging Questions (1) — Lesson 18

Elders: Hard Cases, Clear Text, and Church Judgment

Thesis

Elders are God’s design for shepherding local churches, but difficult situations arise that demand careful Bible reasoning. Some questions are answered directly by Scripture; others require a faithful local church to apply Scriptural principles with wisdom, fairness, and reverence.

Foundations Before the Questions

Before answering anything, the church must keep several truths fixed.

Elders are a Bible appointment, not a human invention

- Elders are appointed in local churches (Acts 14:23).
- The Holy Spirit makes men overseers (Acts 20:28) through the revealed qualifications.
- The work is spiritual: watching for souls (Hebrews 13:17).
- The church is not free to redesign the office or redefine its duties.

Elders must match the New Testament pattern

- Elders belong to a local church (Acts 20:17; 1 Peter 5:2).
- Their authority is not universal; it is among the flock where they serve (1 Peter 5:2).
- They are shepherds, not lords (1 Peter 5:3).
- They lead through example, not domination (1 Peter 5:3).

Shepherding is not a title—it is work

- “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock” (Acts 20:28).

- “Keep watch... as those who will give an account” (Hebrews 13:17).
- “Admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–14).

That means the church must never treat eldership like a badge or a retirement honor. It is labor.

Question 1 — Can a Single Elder Ever Serve Alone?

The Bible pattern: plurality in every local church

When the New Testament speaks of elders in a local church, it consistently speaks in plural terms.

- “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23)
- “sent... to the elders of the church” (Acts 11:30)
- “called to him the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17)
- “to the saints... with the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1)
- “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5)
- “Obey your leaders... they keep watch over your souls” (Hebrews 13:17)

No New Testament church is shown with “the elder” acting alone over a flock. The consistent model is multiple men sharing oversight.

Why the pattern matters

Plurality is not an arbitrary detail. The work itself demands it.

1) Wisdom is strengthened by plurality

“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” (Proverbs 15:22)

That principle is not quoted about elders directly, but the wisdom applies: spiritual leadership is safer when counsel is shared.

2) The flock is protected by plurality

Shepherding includes warning, correcting, and guarding (Acts 20:28–31).

When that load is carried by one man, weakness and blind spots become more dangerous.

3) Leadership is safeguarded from abuse by plurality

Peter warns elders not to “lord it over” the flock (1 Peter 5:3).

Plurality helps prevent personality rule, favoritism, and unchecked dominance.

The hard case: what if elders are reduced to one man?

If three elders are appointed and two die, does the third automatically remain?

Here is the Scriptural reality:

- The New Testament shows a plurality as the normal structure.
- It does not give a direct “emergency rule” for a single elder left behind.

So what must a faithful church do?

What Scripture allows us to conclude

A) The church cannot treat silence as permission

God’s repeated pattern matters. The burden of proof is on anyone trying to justify a structure Scripture never presents.

B) The church must aim to restore the Biblical arrangement

The safest, most Scriptural path is to treat this as a temporary crisis and work toward appointing a plurality again.

C) Practical shepherding still must happen

Even if the church lacks multiple elders, the flock still must be cared for:

- “Brethren... restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1)
- “Admonish the unruly... help the weak” (1 Thessalonians 5:14)
- “Exhort one another day after day” (Hebrews 3:13)

Church life does not stop because elders are absent or reduced.

Bottom line answer

The New Testament pattern is plural eldership.

A church should not be eager to create a “single-elder system.”

The faithful approach is to preserve the Scriptural pattern and seek plurality as soon as possible.

This is an area where the church must act with sobriety and caution, refusing to build a new arrangement from silence.

Question 2 — When Does Absenteeism Disqualify an Elder?

This is one of the most modern problems churches face. Scripture does not give a number of weeks, but it gives unmistakable shepherding duties that require presence.

Elders must know and watch the flock

- “Be on guard... for all the flock” (Acts 20:28)
- “shepherd the flock among you” (1 Peter 5:2)
- “keeping watch over your souls” (Hebrews 13:17)

These commands require real contact with people, not distant supervision.

Presence is built into the work

An elder must be able to:

- recognize spiritual drift
- respond to conflict quickly
- intervene in sin before it spreads
- comfort the weak and grieving
- counsel families in crisis
- confront false teaching
- shepherd personally, not impersonally

Paul told the Ephesian elders to “be on guard” and warned about wolves arising (Acts 20:29–31).

That warning assumes nearness and vigilance.

What Scripture does NOT allow

Absenteeism cannot turn elders into:

- remote administrators
- occasional visitors
- “name-only” shepherds
- men who are present for meetings but absent from lives

Elders are shepherds of souls, not board members.

So where is the line?

Scripture gives the principle, but the church must apply it.

This is one of those questions that **must be decided locally** because only the local church knows:

- the size and health of the flock
- the number of elders
- the man’s true involvement
- whether his absence harms the sheep
- whether emergencies are being neglected

Scriptural tests a church can use

Here are Scriptural questions that guide judgment:

1) Is he actually shepherding “among” the flock?

“shepherd the flock among you” (1 Peter 5:2)

If the man is rarely among them, that command is not being fulfilled.

2) Is he able to “keep watch” effectively?

“they keep watch over your souls” (Hebrews 13:17)

If absence prevents watchfulness, shepherding is compromised.

3) Is he available when needs arise?

“help the weak... be patient with everyone” (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

Availability is part of shepherding.

Bottom line answer

Absenteeism becomes disqualifying when it prevents a man from fulfilling the clear Bible duties of oversight and shepherding.

But the final judgment belongs to the local church, because the local church bears the results of the decision.

Question 3 — Must One Serve as a Deacon Before Becoming an Elder?

Scripture does not require it

The qualifications for elders are given in:

- 1 Timothy 3:1–7
- Titus 1:5–9

In neither passage does God say:

“he must have served as a deacon first.”

Therefore, a church has no authority to create this as a requirement.

Why churches assume it

Serving as a deacon can develop:

- responsibility
- discipline
- reliability
- work ethic
- sacrificial service

And those are good things.

But good experience is not the same as a God-given qualification.

Scripture’s stated proving ground for eldership

The Bible points the church to a man’s home:

- “He must be one who manages his own household well” (1 Timothy 3:4)
- “if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Timothy 3:5)

That is the Scriptural training ground.

Bottom line answer

No, a man does not have to serve as a deacon to become an elder.
If a church requires it, the church has added to God’s qualifications.

Question 4 — Must All an Elder’s Children Be Christians?

(Scripture-driven answer + correcting faulty logic)

This question matters because it touches the home, the heart, and the integrity of the eldership. It must be handled with reverence for Scripture, not assumptions or man-made rules.

The Texts That Govern the Question

Two passages frame the qualification:

- “[He must be] one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity” (1 Timothy 3:4, NASB 1995)
- “For if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Timothy 3:5, NASB 1995)
- “[He must be] having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion” (Titus 1:6, NASB 1995)

Paul’s point is not to create a cruel burden. Paul’s point is to provide **evidence** that a man has demonstrated leadership, order, discipline, and spiritual credibility inside his own home.

The Common Argument — and Why It Is Faulty

Some argue like this:

“If not all his children remain faithful as adults, then he did not manage his household well.”

That sounds like “strong standards,” but it goes beyond Scripture and becomes destructive reasoning.

Why it fails Scripturally

The Bible does not teach that faithful parenting guarantees faithful adult children.

Godly men in Scripture produced children who sinned grievously, even after years of righteous influence.

- **Eli** had sons who were corrupt (1 Samuel 2:12) and brought judgment upon themselves.
- **Samuel** had sons who “did not walk in his ways” and turned aside after dishonest gain (1 Samuel 8:3).
- **David**—a man after God’s heart—had sons who committed sexual sin, murder, rebellion, and treachery (2 Samuel 13–18).

The point is not to excuse failure in the home.

The point is this: **you cannot make a man’s qualification depend on something Scripture**

itself shows can happen even in a godly man's life.

A faithful father can lead well and still suffer heartbreak.

Why it fails logically

That argument assumes a father controls the will of his children forever.

But Scripture teaches personal accountability:

- **“The soul who sins will die.”** (Ezekiel 18:20, NASB 1995)
- **“Each one will bear his own load.”** (Galatians 6:5, NASB 1995)
- **“So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.”** (Romans 14:12, NASB 1995)

A father is responsible for leadership, instruction, correction, example, discipline, and nurture. But the child is responsible for obedience, repentance, and faithfulness.

When people speak as though the father is automatically disqualified because an adult child later becomes unfaithful, they are turning Scripture into a cruel superstition.

When Men Add Conditions, They Sit in God's Seat

The Bible warns against making laws God did not make.

When men demand “all children must remain faithful for life” as a hard requirement, they are not strengthening the eldership—they are **replacing God's wisdom with human rulemaking**.

James condemns this kind of spiritual arrogance:

- **“Do not speak against one another, brethren... He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law... But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.”** (James 4:11, NASB 1995)
- **“There is only one Lawgiver and Judge...”** (James 4:12, NASB 1995)

That principle fits here perfectly:

When men go beyond what God wrote and impose an absolute rule God never stated, they are acting like judges over the law itself.

And Christ warned against the religion that piles burdens on others:

- **“They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders...”** (Matthew 23:4, NASB 1995)

That is exactly what happens when churches create qualifications God never gave.

Paul’s Real Purpose: Evidence of Household Leadership

Paul did not give this qualification to produce fear and suspicion.

He gave it as **proof** that a man can lead with dignity and control.

The requirement is about what his home demonstrates while his children are under his care.

- Order
- Discipline
- Respect
- Serious spiritual leadership
- A household not characterized by rebellion and scandal

And Paul’s logic is direct:

If a man cannot manage the smaller, intimate responsibility of home, he is not fit to manage the larger, weightier responsibility of a local church.

That is the Scriptural purpose.

A Necessary Clarification: “All Children Christians” Can Be a False Comfort

There is another reason the “all children must be Christians” test can become a trap:

Some men appear to “pass” outwardly because all their children were baptized.

But baptism alone is not proof of faithful living.

- **“You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”** (Revelation 3:1, NASB 1995)

- “**Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom...**” (Matthew 7:21, NASB 1995)

So it is possible for a man’s children to have “Christian status,” while the fruit of their lives tells another story.

That does not automatically condemn the father.

And it does not automatically qualify him either.

It simply proves the point:

using a shallow test produces shallow conclusions.

Paul did not give this qualification so churches could check boxes.

Paul gave it so churches could evaluate proven leadership.

A More Logical and Sound Conclusion

Here is the balanced, Scriptural way to say it:

- The qualification is not a guarantee that every adult child will remain faithful for life.
- The qualification is evidence that a man has demonstrated spiritual leadership and discipline in his household.
- Churches must not create additional conditions that God did not reveal.
- Household leadership must be evaluated honestly, not mechanically.
- A man is not qualified by “technicalities,” and he is not disqualified by assumptions.

And if a church turns this qualification into a lifelong scoreboard over adult children, then the church is no longer following Scripture—it is practicing man-made judgment.

Bottom Line

Paul’s qualification is about **proven leadership**, not perfect outcomes.

When the church stays with the text, it produces healthy shepherds.

When the church adds human rules, it produces fear, injustice, and spiritual tyranny.

The standard is God's standard—no more and no less.

Summary of What Scripture Settles vs. What the Local Church Must Decide

Scripture clearly settles

- Elders are shepherds and overseers of a local flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).
- Elders are consistently plural in local churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).
- Deacon service is not a prerequisite for eldership (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).
- Household leadership is a required proving ground (1 Timothy 3:4–5).

The local church must decide by applying Bible principles

- When absenteeism has compromised shepherding (1 Peter 5:2; Hebrews 13:17).
 - How to evaluate complicated household situations fairly and Scripturally (Titus 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:4–5).
 - How to respond to emergency situations without redesigning God's pattern from silence.
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Closing Charge

A church does not honor God by avoiding hard questions.

A church honors God by facing them with the Bible open, hearts humble, and a fear of adding to or taking away from the Lord's design.

Elders are not just administrators.

They are soul-watchers.

So the questions must be answered with seriousness, Scripture, and the wisdom of a faithful local church.