



Qualifications for the Office of Elder

The New Testament makes clear that the Risen Lord Jesus is the head--that is the primary leader--of his church, which is called his Body. The New Testament also demonstrates that the Risen Lord is quite able and ready to speak to, lead, and guide local congregations. He does this through the Scriptures and through the direction of the Holy Spirit discerned by the members of his Body. He also leads his church through delegated authority given to men and women, who by their character, calling, and gifting are recognized by the members of the body and set apart for the task of leadership.

The ultimate model of leadership in the church is the Lord Jesus who came as one who serves. Jesus shows us that servant leadership is the way of God's Kingdom. Leaders are called to follow the Lord's example as they serve, watch over, and care for the church. They are also called to lead the Body in its ministry and mission to the world. Leadership in God's church is a high calling and carries both great authority and great responsibility. It is not to be undertaken out of personal ambition, ego, or for personal prestige. Rather, leadership in the church is to be motivated by love for the Lord, love for his people, and commitment to his mission in the world. It is to be marked by sacrificial service.

At Wellspring, we seek to follow the pattern set out for us in the New Testament in discerning whom the Lord would have serve as elders for his church. This includes the passages that make it clear that both men and women hold leadership positions in the church. In Acts 18:19 Paul leaves a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila, to help establish the new church at Ephesus. It is instructive to note that Priscilla, the wife in the couple, is mentioned first here (as she is in every succeeding reference to this couple). By mentioning Priscilla first it is to be inferred that she had a more prominent ministry role than her husband. Further, in Romans 16 Paul sends greetings to the leaders of the church at Rome. Ten of the twenty nine leaders mentioned are women. First mentioned is Priscilla and Aquila, who led a congregation in their home. We believe the New Testament pattern for leadership includes both men and women in partnership and at Wellspring we seek to follow this pattern.

In Acts 6, when the first leaders of the church other than the original apostles are selected, it is instructive to note that the apostles charge the people to choose their leaders. This does not connote a popularity contest—the church was charged by the apostles to select leaders who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. But it does strongly imply that church leaders are not only to represent the Lord and his ways and his purposes, but also that they are to represent the people whom they lead and serve.

There is no definitive job description for the office of elder in the New Testament. However, we do find in I Timothy 3:1-13 and in Titus 1:6-9 lists of the qualities to be looked for in the spiritual leaders of the church. These listings are not identical, but they certainly are compatible. The qualities to be sought after in an elder can be seen to cluster in three categories: a genuine, mature life in the Spirit; a character that reflects a Christ-like life; and behaviors and actions that grow out of Christian faith and character.

A Genuine and Growing Life in the Spirit. In Acts 6:3 when the apostles charge the people to choose leaders for a growing church in Jerusalem, they were to select those who were “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.” In I Timothy 3:1-13 Paul instructs Timothy to appoint elders who are “able to teach.” Therefore they are not to be “recent convert(s)” but rather those who “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.” In Titus 1:6-9 Paul says an elder is to be one who is “holy and disciplined.” Further, an elder must “hold firmly to the trustworthy message” of the gospel so as to be able to “encourage others” and to “refute those who oppose” the truth.

A Christ-like Character. Expressions of a Christ-like character are especially important in church leadership. In I Timothy 3:1-13 Paul says that church leaders are to be “above reproach, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” Leaders are to have a “good reputation with outsiders, (be) worthy of respect, sincere, temperate and trustworthy in everything.” In Titus 1:6-9 Paul adds that a leader is to be “blameless, not overbearing, not quick-tempered . . . (but) one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled (and) upright.”

Behaviors Sought After in Church Leaders. There is obviously some measure of overlap between a person’s character and the actions and behaviors that flow from one’s character. In I Timothy 1:3-13 Paul emphasizes the need for a church leader to be faithful to his spouse and able to oversee his family and children well. A leader must not be given to “indulging in much wine or pursuing dishonest gain.” In Titus 1:6-9 the same patterns of life are mentioned by Paul. The primary duty of an elder is to serve as a “shepherd of God’s flock.” (I Peter 5:2) This metaphor of a shepherd connotes leading, caring for, nurturing, and seeing to it that the sheep are protected and watered and fed. In John 10:11 Jesus refers to himself as the “good shepherd . . . who has laid down his life for the sheep.” This pattern of sacrificial love and service is to be emulated by the under-shepherds of God’s flock.

The ideals sought after in a church leader are indeed high. Certainly no leader can be fully like Jesus. It is important to see that these ideals are not to be seen as a legalistic check-list, but rather as describing the kind of person to be trusted with leadership. For example, on Paul’s first missionary journey he and Barnabas appointed elders for the churches they had just planted in the various cities where they had proclaimed the good news. (Acts 14:23) In most of these cities Paul and Barnabas had only ministered a few weeks. All of them would have been recent converts. But the newly appointed leaders were expected to grow into their roles as they grew in their walk with the Lord.