

A leader you can follow

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We have a sister church in the NC region of Wisconsin that has been going through a really difficult time the last few years. From the outside everything looked really good; in fact, not just good - great! They were a church on the rise and making an impact. But underneath that facade a cancer was growing. And that cancer was destroying the church from the inside out. Things finally came to a head early in 2015 with a full-blown crisis. Some staff left because they couldn't take it; others were fired; members and attenders left in droves (I'm sure, with hurting, confused, angry hearts). The problems were big enough that it even made the news. Here are some words used in the news article that I read: abuse of power; violation of ethical norms; cult-like activity; manipulation. That's the kind of environment the leaders created. Thankfully, a few wise and courageous people stood up and did something. Eventually, our own Dr. Perry and other leaders from the Great Lakes were invited to help. Now, just a few months later, with healthy, loving, honest leadership and a long way still to go, they are starting to put the pieces back together. I know this church; I sat in prayer meetings with the pastors of this church. It hits pretty close to home. It was hard to believe at first; everything looked so good. But looks can be deceiving, can't they? Leadership matters.

We began a sermon series on church leadership last week and in that first message I demonstrated from the NT that the church of Jesus Christ is to appoint a plurality of elders to lead and guide a congregation. A church needs more than elders; the whole church is meant to serve each other and there are other kinds of leaders within a church family. But Jesus Christ, as the head of the church - the one true pastor and leader - tells us in his word that he wants his church humbly led and served by a collection of elders who together continue his ministry to the people.

So, who should these elders be? What kind of qualities or abilities should they possess? Should the elders be the smartest in the congregation, the hardest working, the most gifted speakers, the one's who've been around the longest? Who serves as elders in a local church might just be one of the most important things about a congregation. Imagine: you're looking for a new church home. The exciting and cutting edge Xtreme Community Church has got the biggest youth group, the most dynamic preacher, the most rockin' worship band and the most people. But the pastors and leaders of this church are arrogant and self-serving; they don't have time for others; they've been known to lie. Their home lives are a mess and they are not thought well of by the community. And then there's Boring Baptist Church. The music is sometimes out of tune, the pastor isn't cool. The facilities are a little outdated and the potlucks aren't worth writing home about. But the leaders and pastors are humble; they are trustworthy and kind. They sacrifice for others. You tell me which church is really on the rise and which one is headed for trouble.

Who leads as an elder is important enough that we find two comprehensive and complementary lists of qualifications in the Bible. Also, there's a third teaching in 1 Peter 5, which we'll talk about in a week or two, that also has a heavy focus on the qualities of an elder. So, again, we're not short on information. We don't have to guess what God wants his elders to be like. Let's read the two lists right now and then start addressing this question together (READ 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

Let's briefly compare these lists. I counted 15 qualifications in both of these lists that describe what elder is supposed to be like. When you compare those lists to each other, you discover that there are 10 qualities found on both lists. In some cases, we have an exact word for word match. "Above reproach," "self-controlled," "hospitable," "not a drunkard" are qualities that exist in both lists with word for word precision. The rest of the 10 qualities on both lists aren't identical word for word matches, but the idea is identical. "Not a lover of money" is the same as "not greedy for gain." "Able to teach" is the same thing as "able to give instruction in sound doctrine." So there are 10 matches. And even with the other 5 that do not have a direct match in the other list, you can tell what Paul is doing, can't you? In both passages he's painting a picture of a godly man with certain abilities.

So, the big idea that we see from these lists of qualifications is that an elder ought to be a man of *character* and *ability*. Those are the keywords; the key attributes of an elder... *character* and *ability*. Before we spend the rest of our sermon talking about character and ability, let me briefly mention the "man" part. The scriptures show there are a lot of similarities between a Christian home and the church of Jesus Christ (we'll see this more in just a minute). And in both the home and in his church (and make note that not in other locations) God's calls a man to be a godly, humble servant-leader.

I know that to the surrounding culture that sounds oppressive and chauvinistic. And there is a way that male leadership can turn ugly in a hurry. We always need to be on guard: the Evil One takes God's good way and twists it for evil. So, in this case, the good of servant and sacrificial leadership by a man of God at home and in church can be distorted when men use their authority and responsibility to hurt women for self-serving purposes rather than help them. May God keep us men of FBC courageous, strong and humble in our service towards others, not in our service towards ourselves.

It's wrong to assume that if someone is the leader, they are better, smarter, more popular and more valued. That's not God's definition of leadership. God's definition of leadership is about serving, sacrificing and stooping. And he established this male leadership after the creation order, not on any perceived superiority of ability. And as men lay down their lives in service towards others in the home and in the church, women, children and others are lifted high. I hope that sounds like good news and not oppression and chauvinism. It's good news that men are called to lead in service in the home and in the church not for their gain, but for the gain of others for the glory of Christ.

So, Paul says elders should be men of character and ability. Now, it's important to notice there is a significant imbalance between those two qualities. Did you notice the imbalance? Paul addresses virtues significantly more often than abilities. In fact, of all the qualities and characteristics mentioned, only two are abilities; all the other qualities are about character. So, it's almost right to say - almost, in that an elder does need some specific abilities - it's almost right to say that an elder must simply be a man of character. He must be a godly man, a man of exemplary conduct (*exemplary* being a key word).

Just look at these qualities from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:

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| - above reproach | - one-woman man | - sober-minded |
| - self-controlled | - respectable | - hospitable |
| - not a drunkard | - not violent, but gentle | - not quarrelsome (or argumentative) |
| - not greedy for gain | - mature in faith | - not arrogant |

What do you think when you look at this list? You might think, "An elder needs to be a spiritual superman! Is anybody like this? I guess I can never be an elder." I get that feeling. So, let me say two things about this. First of all, if an elder has to be all of these things perfectly all the time than we are never going to have any elders, are we? So, that can't be what the lists mean. Here's the conclusion I think we're supposed to come up with: an elder ought to be a man whose life looks like this more than not. His pattern in life is godliness. He's known to be humble, self-controlled and disciplined. He's admired for being kind and honest. And, yes, sometimes temptation gets the best of an elder. But does he repent quickly and then continue his honorable life? That's what we should be looking for in elders. And I'm glad we have men (and women) like that here at FBC.

The second thing we should say about this list (and get this, friends) is we all should be like this! DA Carson helpfully points out that these character qualities listed for an elder are supposed to be true for every follower of Jesus. The church isn't supposed to have 2 groups of people: rascals who aren't elders and saints who are elders. We all should be like this, and with the Holy Spirit we can be. And we all can become like this with the help of godly leaders giving us an example to follow. That's why elders must be men of character; they are the people we all look at for our example; "I want to be patient like Sam is patient; Dan sure is self-controlled; he's a good example; I admire Bill's generosity." We get taught how to be more like Christ by seeing it in other people. Elders are to be people we can emulate.

Back in the church I once served, Big Springs, there is a leader there named Blake. You might just think Blake is from the North Woods. He's just a regular guy. He's a heavy equipment mechanic, if I remember right. He's short on formal *educations*; but he's got a Ph.D in common sense. He's not an upfront person or the life of the party. He's not a polished speaker, I doubt he got A's in speech class in HS. But I was impressed by Blake when I was at Big Springs. Do you know why? He's a godly man. He's honest. He did right by people. He's willing to make

sacrifices for the good of the church as one of the main leaders there. Remember how I said he's not much of a public speaker? Well, that doesn't stop him from giving morning announcements at church or praying before the offering. I'm pretty sure those things don't come easy for him. And I doubt he'd win a Bible trivia award. But he is servant; he's a man of character. And he gives Big Springers a good example to follow. That's the first thing you look for an elder... is he a godly man?

But being a godly man isn't quite enough. It's absolutely necessary, but it's not sufficient. An elder also must have ability. The reason for that is that the Lord Jesus has given elders some work to do. Elders must accomplish something. And to accomplish something you need to have some ability. So what are these abilities that elders needs to have? That list is actually quite small.

The first is the ability to teach. That ability is found in both lists. In 1 Timothy 3:2 Paul simply says he must be "able to teach." The Titus passage says a little more; it says (1:9), "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." The church is built on truth. Truth about God; truth about Christ and his grace; truth about the power of the Holy Spirit. That truth is found in the Word of God. And the church of Jesus Christ gets that truth from the scriptures as taught by elders and others. An elder, then, must be able to teach.

The church needs more teaching than what happens behind the pulpit Sunday after Sunday. Yes, of course, this teaching is very important for the life of the church. But there are more settings than this one. When a small group gathers to learn together, they need teaching. When a couple is struggling in their marriage, they need teaching. When a man needs some one-on-one encouragement or correction, he needs teaching. God's church needs elders and teachers in all of these settings. So, this qualification doesn't mean every elder needs to give a sermon, but it doesn't mean that an elder holds fast the word of God and to know how to study it and pass it on to others. That's teaching.

The second ability that an elder needs to have is the ability to manage his household well. Paul says it this way in vs. 4-5 of 1 Timothy 3, "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 Titus passage says elders should be appointed (Titus 1:6) "...if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination." Did Paul just say that an elder's children need to be followers of Jesus? Sounds like that, right? "His children are believers." That might not be the best way to understand that phrase. A literal interpretation of that phrase sounds like this: "his children are faithful." The word for faith or belief is a fairly broad word which can includes being trustworthy, faithful and dutiful as well as saving faith or belief. And Paul doesn't say children need to be believers in 1 Timothy 3. Why not? I'm thinking it's because he didn't mean believers in Jesus in Titus. Instead, he's saying,

“An elder must have children who are faithful and dutiful to their father’s words; they must be obedient as it shows us that a man knows how to manage his household well.”

A church is a lot more like a home and a family than a corporation, organization or a governmental entity (that should tell us something about what a church should be like). Think about it: God is our Father; Jesus is our perfect brother; we are brothers and sisters together. We gather around a table and share a common meal. No wonder elders, the leaders of a church, need to know how to manage a household and family. The training or proving ground for an elder to lead a church is his own home. Can he disciple and lead his family? Can he manage and maintain a safe, loving and nurturing environment at home? In the face of opposition and disobedience, can he appropriately teach and discipline his children? If he can’t do those things at home he won’t be able to do them in a church. He must manage his own home well.

The title of this sermon is *A leader you can follow*. Maybe I should have said, A leader you *want* to follow. That’s how I feel when I consider these qualifications. I want to follow people like this. Godly men, courageous men. Men who can handle the scriptures and manage the complexities of the family of God. And praise God, the Lord has given us men like this. Now we need to figure out: what are they supposed to be doing? That’s the next two weeks.

Key Verse: 1 Tim. 3:1-2a “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.”

Questions for the week

- When you study the qualifications of an elder, what stands out to you?
- Are there any qualifications that you feel are more critical than others?
- How is your view of biblical leadership changing due to these sermons?