

Liberty Theological Seminary

Biblical Qualifications for
Local Church Leadership

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By

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THESIS STATEMENT

Explaining the biblical qualifications for church leadership allows for the health and well-being of the leader; by maintaining these qualities the leader may successfully achieve a quality walk that is fervent and Godly.

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INTRODUCTION

To describe what church leaders must possess as biblical qualifications could take numerous volumes to detail just one qualification. The biblical qualifications for a church leader are many, but they have been honed down to some of the major points which would help someone going into ministry realize his shortcomings and where to allocate time to grow so he can become a healthy and successful leader.

Success in the church is defined differently from the secular world view of success and this must be defined before going further. Success in the church must be explained by the leader having a close, intimate, and ongoing relationship with God and know Jesus Christ as their Savior intimately. The other qualifications will come into place for the leader once these things are right and the leader is consistently growing more Christ-like daily. However, one must realize that the church leader is human and will sin; it is what the leader will do with that sin and how it is used to further the kingdom as to how the leader will grow passionately toward God.

BODY

When explaining the biblical qualifications of a church leader one must first research where to look and what types of leadership are listed in the Bible. Gene Getz relays this information, “This ‘focus’, of course, also includes those leaders who were called and gifted to have an *itinerant* church-planting ministry (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers), who were often involved in planting local churches and appointing leaders...”¹ If using the previous list of church leaders by Getz one describes which leaders should represent God and Christ through their lives. The list of qualifications for these types of leaders is listed in

¹ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 27.

the type of text directly from scripture. Servanthood, integrity, blamelessness, spiritual maturity, respect, financial soundness (not sordid gain), one-woman man, and the capability to lead (or as some state the gift to lead) are the biblical qualifications for spiritual leaders. Each one of these qualifications is listed in scripture and by the leader relying fully on God to achieve these qualities they may be attainable at some point in life, but will be a continuous work to maintain.

Leaders in the church must first prove themselves as a servant. This is usually contrary to the secular or worldly advice given by leadership books or television gurus. If leaders in the church are sacrificial and are servants then by default they become influential leaders because the dying to self is becoming Christ-like daily. Pringle summarizes this, “Insecurity stops us from serving others. We all prefer to be the important person rather than the lesser...When we’re secure, we can take on any role, even though it might threaten our importance.”² This security that Pringle speaks of is not security in self or esteem, but security in Jesus Christ. With this strength and security in a Savior a leader can rest assured that serving others shows the ones being led that if their leader can serve surely they must do likewise. This is aptly portrayed in scripture with Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. If the greatest leader ever to walk the earth can serve His creation then most assuredly His creation can lower himself to serve others.

Pat Williams discusses how leadership is aided by serving, “Daniel was a servant leader...and because Daniel was willing to be a servant, he rose to a position of great authority and leadership in the Persian Empire.”³ Serving must by its mere act lead one into a source of integrity. This character trait is also an important virtue for a leader to possess.

² Phil Pringle, *Top 10 Qualities of a Great Leader* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1982), 6.

³ Pat Williams, *The Leadership Wisdom of Solomon: 28 Essential Strategies for Leading with Integrity* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2010), 77.

Integrity must play a vital role in any church leadership quality. It is easy to say one has integrity or the ability to lead others to perceive that they have integrity. Dallas Willard states a similar thought, “Think of certain young people who idolize an outstanding baseball player... We know they won’t succeed if all they do is try to be like him in the game—no matter how gifted they may be in their own way.”⁴ If leaders live a pseudo life which appears to be a holy and righteous life before their congregation and their closest friends but live totally opposite lives behind closed doors or even among their immediate family members then their whole life is a farce. Much more important is their life toward God and His favor is a show and a mockery of what God has done for that leader.

In a reference from *Spiritual Leadership* it states,

Integrity means being consistent in one’s behavior under every circumstance, including those unguarded moments. If leaders are honest and moral in public, but discard those standards in private, their lives lack integrity. When leaders have integrity, their followers always know what to expect.⁵

Integrity is vital to a leader in a ministry position to lead effectively while serving God blamelessly.

Many times theologians combine integrity with living blamelessly. While both have similar qualities and demands, living blameless is still somewhat different than integrity. Living a blameless life digs deeper within a leader’s ability to be a leader within his household. In this present culture it has become increasingly more difficult to live a blameless life while rearing children and pastoring a church in a pluralistic society. MacArthur explains, “Society is full of similar frightening trends. The future is unthinkable for a society without any moral standard by

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 3.

⁵ Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2001), 105.

which to determine right and wrong. Already we are willing to sentence people to prison for killing animals, while encouraging abortionists to kill children.”⁶ Living blamelessly is becoming more and more difficult, but this does not mean it is impossible.

Blameless does not mean perfect. MacArthur explains, “If we judged success by worldly standards, some might be inclined to assess Paul’s leadership career as an abject failure and a bitter disappointment...actually the apostle Paul was not a failure as a leader by any measure. His influence continues worldwide even today.”⁷ Most theologians would consider Paul an advocate for blameless living in most circumstances in scripture. Pastoring a church presently in today’s cultural climate is almost as difficult as Paul’s ministry especially in certain parts of the world currently. Being blameless is not just expressing a controlled family or even more important not committing adultery, and not given to wine. Each one of these is a biblical qualification for a church leader; these things must be taken seriously and must have a serious intonation for a leader to remain blameless before the people of his church and his community. If any one of these suffer or the leader cannot control his own family he ruins his reputation and the quality of remaining blameless becomes blemished and will take time and healing for the leader.

So being blameless is possible, difficult, but possible. Daniel Henderson expresses his thoughts on the apostle Paul’s outlook, “One thing I appreciate about the apostle Paul is the way in which he always kept expectations realistic for his followers. He warned them of suffering

⁶ John MacArthur, *What the Bible Says about Parenting: God’s Plan for Rearing Your Child* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 5.

⁷ John MacArthur, *The Book on Leadership* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004), 181-182.

and tribulation as an essential part of the journey.”⁸ Numerous times in scripture leaders have made mistakes and fallen far from God, but inevitably they draw closer to God through the circumstances (i.e. Moses, Abraham, David, etc...). Being blameless is a qualification of a biblical leader as well as being a spiritually mature.

Spiritual maturity appears to be waning in churches in light of the new ‘health and wealth’ gospel being spread by many churches and their pastors. In *The Power of the Call* it states,

There is no possibility of a person being a spiritual leader who does not understand the absolute priority and urgency of being a person of prayer. Prayer is a relationship with God where, in His Presence, He reveals who He is and what He is about. You then can have a sensitive heart that reaches out to God, requesting what He has already put on your heart to do.⁹

This is one of the more important things a leader can do besides reading their Bible on a daily basis. With both of these tools at their hands they are capable of achieving the impossible through God’s capabilities. Sanders sums it up quite well, “Churches grow in every way when they are guided by strong, spiritual leaders with the touch of the supernatural radiating in their service. The church sinks into malaise without such leadership.”¹⁰ Churches must maintain spiritual discipline in their leaders in order to be healthy and grow properly. The crux of spiritual maturity is, in most cases, one must go through trials to refine their life so they can begin to move toward God’s plan for them ultimately. In this process is when spiritual maturity increases typically due to leaning on God for support when there is nowhere else to turn or so it would

⁸ Daniel Henderson, *Defying Gravity: How to Survive the Storms of Pastoral Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 30.

⁹ Henry Blackaby and Henry Brandt, *The Power of the Call* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 14.

¹⁰ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 18.

seem. Sanders again portrays this truth, “The heart that loves God discerns Him busily at work in even the most heartbreaking and unwelcome happenings of life. All things are turning out for the best because God is at work in them, transmuting bane into blessing and tragedy into triumph.”¹¹ Each time a leader endures God emboldens him to greater things and this in turn forms a more mature leader.

Leading with spiritual maturity means teaching, and helping a flock become spiritually mature through possessing a close relationship with Christ. Spiritual maturity is not a myth in the church; members who grow in their maturity due to the leader exhibit a healthy church and will only assist the church in growth spiritually and numerically. Thomas expresses his thoughts on this, “The believers at Antioch made the shift to the privilege of participation. They treated each other as equals and, therefore, avoided the dominance struggles that sap energy, strength, and creativity...The result was that ‘a great number of people were brought to the Lord.’”¹² This type of leadership through possessing spiritual maturity will flow over into every aspect of the leader’s life. This overflow of abundance is contagious to the congregation which in turn overflows into the community and outreach becomes viral. Once the congregation catches the fervor of the leader it is inevitable that the community will see the true church—the body of Christ.

Being a mature leader points to another qualification; being a respectable leader once the leader has attained a spiritual maturity he should exude a respect and just spirit. Mark Driscoll expresses his sentiments on respect from a leader, “...leaders must be in good relations with the

¹¹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity: Principles of Spiritual Growth for Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 16.

¹² Frank A. Thomas, *Spiritual Maturity: Preserving Congregational Health and Balance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 55.

leaders of other godly churches in their area to practice unity on the local level as a witness to the city about the unity of God's people."¹³ By having a good reputation and being in a position of such high esteem speaks to leadership qualities of a pastor if they possess the qualities that Driscoll speaks of about a pastor.

Leaders who possess respect not only carry a high flying banner for Christ, but they also provide esteem for their congregation and their community. Having respect as a trait is invaluable to a church leader and how he is perceived among the congregation and his own family. This virtue is paramount to leading with an effective headship in the church. If a leader possesses spiritual maturity the ability to possess or maintain respect falls easily into place. Paul Chappell explains, "Of Good Behavior – In other words, he is respectable and orderly in his lifestyle."¹⁴ In all aspects a leader is respected and respectable. It becomes inherent in his nature as his focus stays on Christ.

In today's culture it is more difficult than ever for a leader in the church to gain respect much less to maintain it. Ayers states why he believes the respect of pastors has been belittled, "Some people will always try to harm others, just as some will always try to help others. But when people lose their respect for each other, the sacredness of life, morality and common decency, they are in serious trouble."¹⁵ This is not a new idea, but is quite true of the culture in the western belief system. Freedom is so blatantly extorted that people forget without responsibility freedom becomes bondage. Each time a pastor loses respect it becomes extremely

¹³ Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 76.

¹⁴ Paul Chappell, *The Spiritual Leader: A Guidebook for Pastors and Christian Leaders* (Lancaster: Striving Together Publications, 2008), 6.

¹⁵ Philip E. Ayers, *What Ever Happened to Respect: America's Loss of Respect for Pastors* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005), 216.

difficult to attain that respect again. If a church leader attains that respect wisely and grooms this quality respect becomes important in all aspects of the leader's life.

A leader must have the focus of a man which does not have ill-gotten gain in his mind. Money must be a tool not a god. Scripture speaks volumes of money and how His people are to use money. Alcorn sums this up quite well, "...Jesus did not and does not call all his disciples to liquidate their possessions, give away all their money, and leave home. But Jesus knew that money was the rich young man's god. He also knew that none of us can enthrone the true God unless in the process we dethrone our other gods."¹⁶ If leaders have an unhealthy love of money or desire to attain financial wealth their goals are misaligned with what God wants for their lives. One must realize that it is not just a love of money, but a disreputable gain of finances. Stated here from <http://www.neverthirsty.org>, "This mark of spiritual maturity means that the elder is honest in his job, in his financial dealing at the church, and with the government. When we take both of these last two marks of spiritual maturity, we have a picture of an elder whose heart is not focused on money."¹⁷

Realizing the importance of managing money in a leadership role in the church is paramount especially in this present culture. Our news headlines are riddled with men in church leadership making poor choices with church funds. When the church has this type of character leading its people it cannot be prosperous or expect to maintain itself with such foolishness wrought without accountability. Just recently it was noted in the news that two well-known church leaders embezzled money from their churches. One pastor from Tampa Bay area and one

¹⁶ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 5.

¹⁷ Never Thirsty, *Recovering the Pattern of Biblical Leadership*, <http://www.neverthirsty.org/dload/Lead/Recovering-The-Pattern-of-Biblical-Leadership.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2010).

pastor recently convicted from central Ohio. The leaders not only suffer during these lapses of judgment, but the church as a whole suffers tremendously due to the lack of financial responsibility, and integrity. Unfortunately, this is not a new occurrence by pastors, but each time the damage spreads even more to the secular world and is seen through more critical eyes and the church loses an important battle.

Another qualification for a leader in church, and probably the most debated, is the verse in scripture which states in 1 Timothy chapter 3, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife...”¹⁸ This qualification is the most spoken of and debated in churches today among leadership and the congregation. David Whitaker expresses what some have said,

Decades of interpreting 1 Timothy 3:2, 12, and Titus 1:6 to mean that a divorced man can never pastor again because he is no longer the ‘husband of one wife’, disallows these fallen men from complete restoration. It has also greatly contributed to the problem of finding a real answer to my (our) question of ‘How do we help?’ This writer contends that there is a whole host of men who are living with continued and unnecessary guilt due to their past sin(s) because of how they have been viewed. They have been viewed as a cracked china cup to be placed on a shelf, perhaps to hold some miscellaneous items, or to be used as a planter, but never to be used for that which was intended.¹⁹

This qualification for church leadership is a divisive issue among churches which may or may not be put on the back burner of some churches so that men who have been divorced may pastor a church. Ralph Woodrow states his side of this debate, “There is no disagreement that marriage was the original ideal—not divorce...God *himself* is represented as putting away his wife Israel and giving her a bill of divorce (Jer 3:8). If all divorce was hated by God, if all divorce was

¹⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible (NKJV)* (Nashville, Word Publishing, 1997), 1864.

¹⁹ David Whitaker and Chad Mager, *Full Restoration: Rethinking Issues Concerning Divorced Pastors* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005), 3-4.

sinful, then God himself committed sin and did that which he hated! That is absurd.”²⁰

Woodrow has a solid point that even if the verse from Timothy is interpreted as someone who has been divorced in lieu of polygamy that they would still qualify for church leadership if they proved their divorce was scriptural. As for other theologians and their ideologies on this topic Lance Quinn states, “The fourth view says that Paul is simply emphasizing in this phrase, ‘one-woman man,’ the concept of marital faithfulness to one’s present spouse. This seems to be the most natural way to interpret the phrase...But since the phrase has been translated as ‘the husband of one wife,’ it has evoked much needless debate and anguish.”²¹ Quinn states the verse has been interpreted wrong for decades if not hundreds of years which has caused argument over an issue which should have been dealt with in the same manner as all of the other leadership qualifications.

Finally, and probably the most important, is that a church leader must have the capability to lead. Erickson elaborates on this, “At the same time, the need for orderliness suggests that a degree of representative government is necessary. In some situations leaders must be chosen to act on behalf of the group.”²² This suggests what most church congregations already understand—that there needs to be a leader. The leader of the church must be multi-faceted in personality and abilities. The most competent leader leads by example, and with Christ as a church leader’s example they have unlimited resources and precise instruction on how to lead.

²⁰ Ralph Woodrow, *Divorce and Remarriage: What Does the Bible Really Say* (Palm Springs: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Assoc., 2002), 3.

²¹ Grace to You, “Divorce and Eldership,” Lance Quinn, http://www.gty.org/Resources/Articles/A376_Divorce-and-Eldership?q=divorce (accessed December 13, 2010).

²² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 1096.

Vision helps a leader direct the church and John Maxwell explains, “Vision is everything for a leader. It is utterly indispensable.”²³

Leaders must have an inherent ability for heading the church in the right direction and toward the kingdom. Weems describes leadership eloquently, “After all else has been said, the mystery of leadership remains. The greatest paradox in the study of Christian leadership, but the most hopeful promise, is that whatever else leadership may be, for the Christian church, it always remains a gift from God. It is a treasure in clay jars.”²⁴

Leaders may have a natural attitude and personality when it comes to leading. Some churches expect someone younger to serve on their elder or deacon board prior to becoming their pastor or church leader. This is contrary to scripture as noted in *Christ in Church Leadership*, “...the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy present a local church situation where a younger man serves in a pastoral role without being an elder...Timothy was never called an elder, yet he was called to be a pastor-teacher by preaching and teaching the Word and by confronting false teachers and errant doctrines.”²⁵

CONCLUSION

The qualifications of a church leader are numerous and extremely difficult to master. Each qualification seems to build on the other so that as one becomes a leader they must constantly work at each qualification. The process may appear to be circular and for all intents and purposes it should be circular; this process will provide a strong foundation in leadership

²³ John C. Maxwell, *Leadership 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 53.

²⁴ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Church Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 131.

²⁵ Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership: A Handbook for Elders and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 182.

abilities and continue to strengthen the leader. Obviously the church leader must maintain his relationship with God. This relationship is paramount to a successful and healthy church leader which in turn correlates to church health.

If the leader has a healthy relationship with Christ and is totally consumed by his walk with God this will overflow into the congregation. This becomes a reciprocal relationship between the leader of the church and the church/congregation itself. As the leader becomes healthy and vibrant in their relationship to the Lord, the church senses that the leader is Godly and flourishes off this attitude.

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