

QUALIFICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

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Apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, nothing is more important for the life and growth of the local church than effective spiritual leadership. Therefore, it is the purpose of this brief study to help clarify the qualifications for such leadership as found in the New Testament, and to show how those qualifications apply to both potential and current leaders here at BranchCreek Community Church.

Preliminary Considerations

1. *The primacy of humility* – Jesus could hardly have been clearer about the absolute necessity of an attitude of servanthood when it comes to being a spiritual leader. He taught that authentic Christian leadership bears no resemblance to the domineering and authoritarian style characteristic of the unbelieving world:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45, NIV; par. Matthew 20:25-28; see also Luke 22:24-27; Mark 9:33-35; Matthew 23:11; John 13:1-7).

2. *The assumption of giftedness* – Among the spiritual gifts given to the church for effective ministry are gifts of leadership, and it is assumed that those desiring to serve as leaders will evidence such giftedness:

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Romans 12:6-8, NIV; see also 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Peter 4:10-11).

3. *The necessity of evaluation* – Not just anyone can or should be a leader. There are at least five biblical passages – including two extensive lists – that specify the qualifications for spiritual leadership, and so it is clear that God would have the church carefully evaluate those aspiring to serve in such a capacity. The apostle Paul put it this way (concerning deacons, although it applies to elders/overseers as well): “And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (1 Timothy 3:10, ESV).

The Earliest Reference to Qualifications

Acts 6:1-6 – When the very first community of believers needed to expand its leadership base to care for the needs of a growing church,

“the Twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task’” (*Acts 6:2-3, NASB*).

The criteria for identifying spiritual leaders was pretty simple: first, a “good reputation,” that is, being well-spoken of or approved by others (see *Acts 10:22; 16:2; 22:12*); then, being “full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” which would include what we now know as “the fruit of the Spirit” (*Galatians 5:22-23*). What we find is that the later, more detailed lists of qualifications for spiritual leadership simply expand on these basic criteria (as the following table shows).

Later References to Qualifications

#	TITUS 1:5-9, NIV (elder/overseer)	1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7, NIV (overseer)	1 PETER 5:1-5, NIV (elder/overseer/pastor)	1 TIMOTHY 3:8-13, NIV (deacon/deaconess)
1.		“Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (v. 1)	“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be” (v. 2)	
2.	“An elder must be blameless” (v. 6) “Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless” (v. 7)	“Now the overseer must be above reproach” (v. 2) “He must also have a good reputation with outsiders” (v. 7)		“They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them [i.e., they are “blameless”], let them serve as deacons” (v. 10)
3.	“the husband of but one wife” (lit. “one woman man”; v. 6)	“the husband of but one wife” (v. 2)		“A deacon must be the husband of but one wife” (v. 12)
4.	“a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient” (v. 6)	“He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect” (v. 4)		“and must manage his children and his household well” (v. 12)
5.	“not overbearing” (v. 7)		“not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (v. 3)	
6.	“not quick-tempered” (v. 7)	“not quarrelsome” (v. 3)		
7.	“not given to drunkenness” (v. 7)	“not given to drunkenness” (v. 3)		“not indulging in much wine” (v. 8)

8.	"not violent" (v. 7)	"not violent but gentle" (v. 3)		
9.	"not pursuing dishonest gain" (v. 7)	"not a lover of money" (v. 3)	"not greedy for money, but eager to serve" (v. 2)	"and not pursuing dishonest gain" (v. 8)
10.	"Rather he must be hospitable" (v. 8)	"hospitable" (v. 2)		
11.	"one who loves what is good" (v. 8)			
12.	"who is self-controlled" (v. 8)	"self-controlled" (v. 2)		
13.	"upright" (or "just"; v. 8)			
14.	"holy" (v. 8)			
15.	"and disciplined" (v. 8)	"temperate" ("clear-minded"; v. 2)		"temperate" (v. 11)
16.	"He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught" (v. 9)			"They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience" (v. 9)
17.	"...encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (v. 9)	"able to teach" (v. 2)		
18.		"respectable" ("dignified," "decent," "well-behaved"; v. 2)		"Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect" (v. 8) "In the same way, [deaconesses] are to be women worthy of respect" (v. 11)
19.		"He must not be a recent convert" (v. 6)		
20.				"sincere" (lit. "not double-tongued"; v. 8) "not malicious talkers" (v. 11)

Titus 1:5-9 – Providing leadership qualifications for fairly new churches that as yet had no spiritual leaders in place, this list is the most orderly of the four. It consists of the overall qualification of blamelessness, which is then further described in the following five vices and seven virtues. Only one item (v. 9) is unique to leadership; all others represent observable, moral qualities that should characterize all church members. As I. Howard Marshall explains, "there is no 'higher standard' for church leaders, but it is expected that they will actually show the qualities which are desirable for all believers."¹

First Timothy 3:1-7 – This list is very similar to the previous one, only now the situation is not that of a new church in need of leaders, but an established church experiencing something of a leadership crisis (which probably explains the slight differences). It begins and ends on the same note – emphasizing the need for a good reputation (i.e., being above reproach), which is synonymous with blamelessness. The qualities mentioned in between provide the details. Once

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 472.

again, only a few items seem to be specific to leadership (e.g., “able to teach”); all others are qualities that should characterize every believer.

First Peter 5:1-5 – This passage is not so much a list of qualifications as it is a word of encouragement for those entrusted with the responsibility of leadership. However, it reinforces a couple of the vital qualities found in the previous passages, and also emphasizes the importance of serving as a leader “not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be” (v. 2, NIV). In other words, no one should be pressured into fulfilling a leadership role, for “God wants our ungrudging service.”²

First Timothy 3:8-13 – The previous three passages dealt with qualifications for elders/overseers/pastors (i.e., the primary leadership of a local church). Here we are given qualifications for deacons/deaconesses, although, interestingly, this list is not substantially different from the others. The primary issue is still blamelessness (v. 10), which is expressed in observable, moral behavior. Noticeably absent, however, is any mention of the ability to teach, which suggests that deacons/deaconesses “enjoyed no church-recognized teaching authority akin to that of elders.”³

Application 1: What Qualifies a Leader to Serve?

As one writer put it, “whatever the circumstances of a church, its leadership must be of the highest moral standard in all aspects of life; to expect less is to place the church’s reputation and ministry in jeopardy.”⁴ Here is my recommendation for applying the above biblical data in a practical way as we look to mobilize people to serve as spiritual leaders here at BranchCreek. It follows the basic outline of Titus 1:5-9 while incorporating the items from the other passages as well:

General qualification: Leaders must be blameless

It is of overall importance that a candidate for spiritual leadership be “blameless” (Titus 1:6-7; 1 Tim 3:10) or “above reproach” (1 Tim 3:2). In other words, he or she must be well-thought of or looked up to, having a good reputation both inside and outside the church (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:7). Obviously, this does not mean that the person will be flawless or faultless, but rather that he or she will have “unquestioned integrity” or “irreproachable *observable* conduct,”⁵ where “no just ground will be found for any criticism.”⁶ The standard is high, but there it is. John Stott adds a practical comment: “This provides biblical warrant

² Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 188. J. Ramsey Michaels adds, “Peter knows that the human ego is a severe and unhealthy taskmaster and that ministry all too often becomes a compulsive act of self-gratification. He wants it instead to be a free and joyous response to God’s love” (1 Peter, WBC [Waco: Word Books, 1988] 284).

³ D. A. Carson, “Church, Authority in,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 226.

⁴ Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 224.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988) 80.

⁶ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972) 146.

for requiring references or testimonials, so that a candidate's public reputation may be ascertained."⁷

This general qualification of blamelessness may now be specifically applied to three important areas of a potential leader's life (again, following the outline of Titus 1:5-9):

1. *Leaders must be blameless in their marriage and family life*

It is clear from our passages that "the home is regarded as the training ground for Christian leaders."⁸ In particular, two qualities must stand out:

- a. *Faithfulness in marriage* – Literally "one woman man" (or husband of one wife; Titus 1:6; 1 Tim 3:2, 12), the phrase is best understood as a reference to marital fidelity (cp. 1 Tim 5:9, where we find the parallel phrase "one man woman").⁹ Marshall appropriately adds, "our own age illustrates forcibly how the slightest suspicion of sexual irregularity is seized upon as a ground for accusation against Christian leaders."¹⁰

It should be noted that the phrase used here assumes that leaders will be male and married, however this does not necessarily preclude women or single people (whether never married or divorced) from serving in positions of leadership.¹¹ At the very least, the principle of sexual purity would apply across the board.

- b. *Effective leadership at home* – This involves proper management of the household (1 Tim 3:4, 12; a duty shared with the spouse, I might add – see 1 Tim 5:14) and faithfulness in parenting (1 Tim 3:4; Titus 1:6). Concerning the latter, Titus 1:6 says in the NIV (and most translations), "a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient." This is one step beyond what 1 Timothy 3:4 says ("see that his children obey him with proper respect"), and raises the question as to whether a leader's children must all be Christians. The short answer is that the word "believe" could also be translated "faithful" or "loyal", implying faithfulness in obedience (which would parallel 1 Tim 3:4).

The reason for this particular qualification – effective leadership at home – is that "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tim 3:5, NIV). That's a fair question! And for those who are single or married without kids, the principle still stands: "Before being accepted for a wider ministry, they should have proved themselves in a narrower one."¹²

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 92.

⁸ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 185. Fee adds, "a good look at the man's home life will tell much about his character and his ability to give leadership to the church" (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 173).

⁹ For a discussion of the various positions held on this phrase, see Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 154-157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 154-155.

¹¹ Considering these important issues is beyond the scope of this brief study.

¹² Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* 176.

2. *Leaders must be blameless in their personal character and conduct*

Specifically, and negatively speaking,

- a. *Not overbearing*, but humble (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet 5:3; i.e., not arrogant, self-willed, or pushy)
- b. *Not quick-tempered*, but patient (Titus 1:7; i.e., not irritable or impatient)
- c. *Not quarrelsome*, but peaceable (1 Tim 3:3; i.e., not combative or prone to bickering)
- d. *Not addicted to wine*, but free from all addictions (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3, 8)
- e. *Not violent*, but gentle (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3; i.e., not a bully or self-asserting¹³; this is related to all of the above items)
- f. *Not a lover of money*, but generous (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3, 8; 1 Pet 5:2; i.e., not greedy)
- g. *Not double-tongued*, but sincere (1 Tim 3:8, 11; i.e., not talking out of both sides of their mouth)

Positively speaking,

- a. *Hospitable* (Titus 1:8; 1 Tim 3:2; i.e., having a “love for strangers” and gladly welcoming people into their homes)
- b. *Loving what is good* (Titus 1:8; i.e., “a selfless attitude and desire for what is inherently good,”¹⁴ one who supports good causes)
- c. *Self-controlled* (Titus 1:8; 1 Tim 3:2; i.e., “having his wits about him,” or being sensible)
- d. *Just* (Titus 1:8; i.e., upright or fair in dealing with other people)
- e. *Holy* (Titus 1:8; i.e., devout in conduct toward God; a worshiper)
- f. *Disciplined* (Titus 1:8; related to c. above, self-controlled, possibly with a sexual nuance here)
- g. *Sober-minded* (1 Tim 3:2, 11; i.e., temperate or having sound judgement; related to c. and f. above)
- h. *Respectable* (1 Tim 3:2; cf. 3:8, 11; i.e., dignified, well-behaved; related to c., f., and g. above)

3. *Leaders must be blameless in embracing and teaching the truth*

The final category of blamelessness has to do with how a potential leader responds to and ministers the Word of God.

- a. *Holding firmly to the Word* – That is, “He must have a strong and steadfast belief in the trustworthy message he was taught” (Titus 1:9, NLT), or “must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:9, NIV). To put it yet another way, a leader must “be absolutely devoted to the gospel.”¹⁵
- b. *Able to skillfully teach the Word* – The reason that a potential leader is to hold firmly to the truth is so that he or she will be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2, NIV) or, more specifically, “so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9, HCSB). This is the one duty clearly emphasized in the lists of

¹³ Stott comments that spiritual leaders “never ride rough-shod over other people’s sensitivities. They will lead by example not by force, and by humble service not by self-assertion” (*The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* 177).

¹⁴ Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* 163.

¹⁵ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 175.

qualifications for spiritual leadership. On the positive side, leaders are to *encourage* others, which “suggests instruction with a practical bent, something more than simply detailing facts and doctrines, and it carries an element of persuasion and even command (cf. [Titus] 2:6, 15).”¹⁶ On the negative side, they are to *refute* those who oppose right teaching, showing them where they are wrong.

Given that this particular qualification appears in the passages relating to elders and overseers, but not in those relating to deacons/ deaconesses, it is fair to ask whether it applies to all positions of spiritual leadership. It certainly applies to anyone serving in the primary leadership of the church, but in other cases it may be sufficient that a leader holds firmly to the Word (a.), without necessarily being able to teach it skillfully.

- c. Finally, *he [or she] must not be a recent convert* (1 Tim 3:6). Obviously, one who keeps hold of the deep truths of the faith and is skilled at teaching truth and refuting error will be a person who is mature in the faith. In other words, spiritual leadership is no place for a new believer. Otherwise, “he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil” (1 Tim 3:6), to say nothing of how the church would fare!

Application 2: What Disqualifies a Leader from Serving?

It is clear enough that if the biblical passages considered above provide us with the basic qualifications for those desiring to serve as spiritual leaders, then those currently serving the church in such a capacity may be disqualified on the basis of failing to uphold the same criteria. However, it is also clear that leaders must be protected from hasty and unsubstantiated accusations. Specifically, as a safeguard, we are to “not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses” (1 Tim 5:20).

Further, we must give careful consideration to the weight of an apparent violation of the qualifications for spiritual leadership on the part of a current leader. Questions such as, “is this an isolated incident or an observable and growing pattern of life?” are relevant when, for example, a leader loses his temper in a particular situation. At the same time, other violations, such as marital unfaithfulness – even if it only happened once, likely signal deeper problems and more severely compromise that person’s reputation and therefore their ability to serve as a spiritual leader.

And what is to happen when a spiritual leader sins? Should the church be told?¹⁷

The restorative process of Church discipline, as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, involves the public rebuke of “a brother who sins against you” only as a last resort. In other words, if the offender refuses to repent after personal confrontation by an individual, as well as confrontation by two or three witnesses, Jesus says to “tell it to the church” (implying, of course, that the offender is active in that local body of believers).

¹⁶ Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* 167.

¹⁷ Matters of Church discipline, especially as they relate to spiritual leaders, require careful study of the relevant biblical texts, as well as prayerful discussion among those laboring to understand and apply what is learned.

But what about a spiritual leader who sins? Is the same process to be followed, or are there additional considerations that must be taken into account when a leader falls? Shortly after outlining the qualifications for spiritual leaders in 1 Timothy (3:1-13), Paul goes on to address the matter of what to do when a leader is clearly guilty of sin. He says, “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Tim 5:20). What exactly does this mean?

First of all, “those who sin,” as a present participle in the Greek, can either be referring to someone presently persisting in sin, or simply someone guilty of the accusation of a past or present sin. If the former is in view, then the public rebuke would be similar to the “last resort” mentioned above – an attempt to bring the sinning leader to repentance (see, for example, Gal 2:11-21). However, if the latter is in view, and the leader has genuinely repented of his or her sin, then “the ‘public rebuke’ would function more as a ‘public acknowledgement’ of the sin *and the repentance* that has taken place.”¹⁸ However, this raises the question as to whether doing so is *required* in that case (James 5:16 may address this).

Second, as the present participle suggests, the “sin” that is in view here is almost certainly not a single “slip-up,” but some sort of regular failing or character deficiency that clearly violates the qualifications for spiritual leadership. In other words, the issue is a leader in the habit of sinning, not committing an occasional sin (for who, then, could lead?).

Third, the “public” nature of the rebuke or confession is limited to the church (lit. “before all”), those who the offender has been leading and, consequently, whose trust has been violated. Such public action is not to shame or humiliate, but to begin (or continue) the process of healing and restoration (see Gal 6:1-2). In light of this, there should be careful consideration as to what all is said publicly.

Finally, the expressed purpose (although surely not the only purpose) for the public rebuke of a sinning leader is “so that the others may take warning” (lit. “may fear”). The “others” may be other leaders, or, more likely, the church as a whole, and they are to have a healthy “fear” in such circumstances – fear of God, fear of receiving a public rebuke, fear of the devastating consequences of a life of sin.

So, when a spiritual leader sins, should the church be told? With the above clarifications in mind, the answer, according to Scripture, appears to be “yes” in most circumstances. And the wisdom of this is not hard to see, given the public nature of spiritual leadership, the confusion that arises when a leader steps down (if that happens), the need to shut down the rumor mill, and our call to live as “God’s holy people” (Eph 5:3) – especially concerning those who are to be leading the people by godly example (see 1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7; 1 Pet 5:2-3). However, such action should always be approached in an attitude of love and humility, seeking healing for both the fallen leader and those hurt by the sin.

¹⁸ J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), p. 120.

Conclusion

God has gifted and called various people to serve as leaders in his church, and he has provided us with a number of detailed lists of qualifications for identifying them. Our responsibility, quite simply, is to make use of these guidelines so that the right kind of people will be mobilized to serve in a leadership capacity. It is my hope that this study will help us do just that. Stott provides us with a fitting summary: Those who would serve as leaders

must give visible evidence in their behavior that they have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, that their new birth has led to a new life, that their fallen passions are under control, and that the ninefold fruit of the Spirit has at least begun to appear and to ripen in their lives.¹⁹

¹⁹ Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* 176.