

The Influence and Authority of Church Leaders and Elders

By Bob Young*

Leaders are those who influence others. Different kinds or sources of influence lead to different styles of leadership. I identify two primary sources of influence or authority. I describe them as personal influence and positional authority. Some call these two kinds of authority. Personal influence depends on who I am—my personal characteristics and relationships. Positional authority depends on where I am—the position I hold. Personal authority is earned; positional authority is given or designated. Sometimes the two are integrated, as when positional authority is granted based on personal characteristics.

Personal Influence

Personal influence leads to leadership based on who a person is and relationships with others. Personal influence is built on trust. In many ways, personal influence is more powerful than designated authority. Personal influence is not the result of worldly success. Especially in the church, leadership is not a matter of how successful one is in his work, community, or family. Without personal influence to lead people in a congregation, one cannot truly function as an elder.

Personal influence is the result of establishing healthy relationships. The Bible describes elders as persons with effective relationships.

- With God, develop an exemplary spiritual life
- In the family, with spouse and children
- In the church, relationship with the members
- With outsiders, in the neighborhood, with unbelievers
- In the marketplace, in one's business

Positional Authority

Positional authority is designated authority or official authority. This is authority granted by a higher authority or within an organization.

In churches, ministers often get positional authority first and then earn personal influence and respect. Elders earn personal influence through years of relationship building in the congregation and then are given positional authority. They prove themselves so they are appointed as elders. An elder candidate may have many demonstrated leadership skills, but if he does not have the trust of the congregation, he will not be able to lead effectively.

Selecting elders in a local church

As a church considers the selection of elders, a helpful question is: Whom do you trust? This is different from questions like, "Who believes what I believe?" or "Who agrees with me?" or "Who do I get along with or like?" The question of trust is this: who does the right thing always? To whom would you be willing to confess your darkest sin? To whom would you entrust your money, or your spiritual life? Those whose names you list to answer these questions are spiritual leaders. They have personal authority. With the guidance of God's word, such men can be considered as shepherd candidates.

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