

## Spiritual leadership in the Church

### By Bob Young

Effective, spiritual Christian leadership is essential. The focus of this article is on that group of leaders described in the New Testament as elders. The church must have effective spiritual leaders—especially among those described biblically as elders (bishops-pastors-shepherds),<sup>1</sup> but the New Testament also describes others who served in a leadership capacity—servants, ministers, deacons, teachers, evangelists, and preachers. The spiritual family suffers without effective spiritual leadership. Our nation needs spiritual leaders in touch with biblical foundations and principles, those who reflect those principles in their value systems and in their lives. No segment of society is exempt from the need for spiritual leadership; every person is made better where spiritual leadership exists.

What is a biblical description of spiritual leadership? Have we made spiritual leadership too hard? Consider this brief summary of the Bible teaching.

→First, spiritual leaders are people of character.

→Second, spiritual leaders have developed and use certain skills to do their spiritual work.

→Third, spiritual leaders recognize and accept certain responsibilities toward those they lead, so that followers and leaders exist in mutual relationship with mutual responsibilities.

→Finally, spiritual leaders can be identified by observing their character and their actions, and by evaluating their experience—in the church, in their families, in their neighborhoods and communities.

→First, spiritual leaders are people of character. This character may be described as spiritual, personal, and relational. This character is reflected in certain qualities. A partial list of the character qualities (or qualifications) for elders, as reflected in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, includes numerous positives: just, holy, patient, vigilant, orderly, a lover of good, sober-minded, temperate, and gentle, given to hospitality. It also includes descriptions stated negatively: not a striker, not a brawler, not self-willed or stubborn, not contentious, not soon angry, not a lover of money.

→Second, spiritual leaders must develop and possess certain abilities or skills that are essential to the work they are charged to do. These abilities correspond to their tasks and duties. When one thinks of the work of elders, among the abilities which the Bible mentions are the following: apt to teach, 1 Tim. 3:2; holding fast the faithful word, Tit. 1:9; able to convince the gainsayer, Tit. 1:9-10; in summary, having a good knowledge of the scripture in order to feed, exhort, teach, and be an example; holding sound doctrine.

→Third, spiritual leaders have certain responsibilities to those they lead, which responsibilities are defined in Scripture and fulfilled in life by certain actions. Spiritual leaders and their followers exist in a relationship of mutuality, each with responsibilities toward the other.

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<sup>1</sup> See the brief Bible study at the end of this article, “**Elders, Presbyters, Bishops, Pastor-Shepherds.**”

What are some of the responsibilities of spiritual leaders toward the church? What do spiritual leaders do? A quick overview suggests they teach, offer counsel, are responsible for equipping, serve as mentors, and feed (“pastor, shepherd”).

What do elders do? What are their responsibilities? The following words are used in the Bible to describe the duties or responsibilities that elders as spiritual leaders have toward their followers: oversee or superintend, Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; feed the flock, Acts 20:28; be examples, 1 Pet. 5:1-3; Heb. 13:7; rule or lead, 1 Tim. 5:17; watch for the souls of the flock, Heb. 13:17; watch for and protect against opposing forces (wolves), Acts 20:17, 28-31.

Some of the duties of members toward elders include to honor them, 1 Tim. 5:17; not to receive an accusation except in certain cases, 1 Tim. 5:19; Matt 18; to follow their faith (to imitate them), Heb. 13:7; to obey them and submit to them, Heb. 13:17; and to pray for them.

→ Finally, spiritual leaders can be identified by observing their lives—both inside and outside the church. They are identified by their experience, their character and their actions in other areas of life. They have a certain attitude: willing, but not overeager, 1 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:2; they are leaders in other areas of life; for example, they are experienced domestically and spiritually (1 Tim. 3:6). This experience is reflected also in their reputation, both within the church and among non-Christians, Tit.; 1:6, 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:7.

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### **Elders, Presbyters, Bishops, Pastor-Shepherds**

A biblical definition of leadership includes a study of the words used to describe a specific group of leaders in the church of the New Testament. These Greek words are translated in various ways, as outlined below. These words refer to only one group of leaders. All three words are used in Acts 17 to describe the same group of leaders (although the verb *poimaino* is used instead of the noun *poimen*).

- *Presbuteros*, translated elder, presbyter. This likely implies some decision making, making right judgments as the Old Testament elders at the gate.
- *Episkopos*, translated bishop, overseer. Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:8. An overseer, a person charged with the duty of seeing that the things done by others are done rightly, a superintendent.
- *Poimen*, translated pastor, shepherd. Eph. 4:11, a herdsman, especially a shepherd. In the New Testament, it does not appear that this word is used to refer to those who served as ministers, preachers, or evangelists.