



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 1 • WINTER 1998

PROVEN CHARACTER: PRELUDE TO POSITION

David W. Hegg

If, as is generally agreed, “Everything stands or falls on leadership,” then the task of selecting and establishing leadership in the church has tremendous importance. This may take the form of recruiting people to serve in a wide variety of roles in the church. From staffing various ministries, to raising up elders, the pastoral team spends a great deal of time and energy recruiting people, and placing them into positions to which at least some authority is attached.

At its essence, leadership is influence. When you entrust people with leadership authority you also assume that their influence will have a positive effect on those around them, and on the church at large. This task of putting people into positions of influence lies very close to the core of pastoral oversight. Energy and wisdom invested in the process will yield great rewards. This is true for at least two reasons:

- 1) Organizations tend to take on the personality of their leaders. Nowhere should this axiom be more evident than the church. The New Testament clearly shows that leaders are known for their faithfulness—faithful in areas of faith, character and deed. Consequently, maturing godly leadership, by exhibiting the gifts and graces of Christ, creates an environment which fosters spiritual growth in their followers. Conversely, poor leaders tend to create confusion and promote compromise, which, in turn, promotes

spiritual complacency and stagnation. To have faithful, spiritually minded churches, we must first have faithful, spiritually minded leaders.

2) The answer to most organizational problems is the right person in the right place. We have all experienced the joy of handing a project or idea to the right person and then watching as he took it further and made it better than we ever imagined. We have also watched the havoc created by a person whose maturity did not match the need of the situation. The most efficient way to accomplish God's work in God's way is to select, train, and unleash godly leaders.

THE STARTING LINE

While this selection process certainly presents many challenges, perhaps none is bigger than the initial question: *How do we determine those in whom we will invest leadership authority?* More specifically, what is the *first* element in determining fitness for spiritual leadership in the church? Is it talent? Personality? Career success? Is it knowledge of the Bible? Ministerial giftedness? While pragmatic approaches to the church life offer differing opinions, the Bible is quite clear. Assuming that the individuals are indeed regenerate, the visible display of consistent Christian character is the first prerequisite to spiritual leadership.

Paul, in writing to Timothy about leadership in the churches, stressed the priority of visible Christian character. He insisted that those chosen as elders not be newly converted lest they "become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the Devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). He went on to insist that deacons must "first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach" (1 Tim. 3:10). The pressures which accompany leadership put stresses on the life which can be adequately handled only by those who are spiritually mature, and have demonstrated, under testing, that their character is above reproach. For

this reason Paul commanded church leaders not to "lay hands upon anyone hastily" (1 Tim. 5:22) lest they share responsibility for the sinful situations which naturally arise when a man's character is unable to bear the weight of responsibility placed upon him. Certainly the apostles understood this when they gave the standards for choosing assistants: "But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). While these texts speak directly to recognized offices in the church, they demonstrate the general principle for all ministry: Proven character must precede position. Paul summarizes it beautifully in his instructions to Timothy: "And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

It is very important to note that Paul's exhortation was to find men who were *primarily* faithful. How often have we pastors been faced with this type of decision? We have one slot to fill and two candidates: One is very able, talented, skillful and energetic, yet is either untested, or has evidenced weaknesses in some areas of character. The other has a heart for God, has shown himself to be faithful over time, yet isn't as talented or skillful. We begin to play the risks against the advantages, more often than not underestimating the importance of character. We begin to dream about just how far and how fast the talented individual can take us as a church. We may even convince ourselves that knowing his flaws will enable us to protect against them. But this is a mistake. We all too often choose those who are "able" and end up wishing they were "faithful."

A QUICK REALITY CHECK

Here is a simple way to test yourself to see how important character is in your mind. Ask yourself these three questions, and answer them honestly:

- 1) Whose advice finds welcome acceptance in my ear?
- 2) Whose perspective has influence over the way I see things, and the actions I take?
- 3) What about these people has made them my "honored advisors"?

No doubt you were quickly able to identify some names in answer to questions one and two. But what about question three? Are your closest advisors—those whose influence affects your thinking and acting—known for their proven character? Have you entrusted spiritual leadership to those whose lives demonstrate spiritual maturity? Is that what drew you to them, and led you to entrust them with spiritual leadership and influence? Or were you merely impressed with their talents, skills, knowledge, success, etc.? These are hard questions, and they cause us to think honestly about a most crucial issue in church life. If our churches are going to "shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" we must first reaffirm the truth that proven character precedes position.

HOW MUCH CHARACTER IS NEEDED?

My definition of Christian character is drawn from the many biblical texts which speak to how a Christian should live. The following list is not exhaustive, but does give a sufficient foundation for what I call Christian character: Matthew 5-7; John 15; Romans 8, 12-15:6; Galatians 5; Ephesians 4-6:9; Philippians 1:27-2:4; Colossians 3-4:6; 1 Timothy 3; James 1, 3:13-18; Titus 1:5-9; 2-3; 1 Peter 1:13-3:15; 5:1-11; 2 Timothy 2.

Christian character may be loosely defined as those traits and attitudes which the Spirit of God produces in the life of the believer. To the extent that the Spirit is unencumbered by sin, and the individual pursues Christ (through the Word, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and other spiritual disciplines) these "fruits" of godliness mature and become

recognizable. For example, take patience, which in many ways is the opposite of anger. In the life of the maturing Christian, patience should increasingly be replacing anger. Conversely, a life in which anger is conspicuously present testifies to a lack of spiritual discipline and a corresponding quenching of the Spirit.

Unfortunately, pastoral leaders often do not observe the lives of individuals with discernment. They may never ask or answer tough questions about their character of life before investing them with leadership authority and influence.



So, how do you determine just how much character is needed for leadership? Is anger now and then allowable? Is arrogance allowable in small doses? Is perfection the only standard? In answer I propose this single, broad question: *Does the individual exhibit a conspicuous deficiency in areas of Christian character?* This is not a hard question to answer if you are honest. It does, however, necessitate getting to know the individual over time. If you determine to occupy a front row seat on the life of a potential leader, over time his true character will be clearly seen. Unfortunately, pastoral leaders often do not observe the lives of individuals with discernment. They may never ask or answer tough questions about their character of life before investing

them with leadership authority and influence.

THE PERIL OF PRAGMATISM

Why is it that church leaders are often tempted to overlook questions of character when filling positions of leadership? There are many reasons, and taken together they portray a modern church that has left many biblical moorings of ministry. When we fail to see character as a priority for leadership, we evidence the extent to which we have been infected by the pragmatic spirit of the age.

1) The modern church's desire for instant excellence leads it to value expertise and efficiency over proven character.

Tragically, the principle that character precedes position is often only rediscovered as part of the clean-up, when lives without integrity crumble under the weight of circumstances and temptation.



The mistake being made today is in thinking that God's blessings come via man's ability. A quick survey of the literature which flows across our desks will argue that it is management skill, organizational vision, music style, lighting, communicative arts, or some other popular growth mechanism which is really the engine of church success. And sad-

ly, too many pastors have decided to try one or more of these shortcuts. But the truth is that this is still Christ's church, and He has said emphatically that He would build it. And true blessing in ministry has always been connected to righteousness, and a passion to let God work through the efforts of the faithful. McCheyne's exhortation desperately needs to become an abiding plank in our ministry philosophy: "It is not great gifts that God blesses, as it is great likeness to Christ."

2) The modern church so desperately wants to be accepted by society that it has reconstructed its standards for leadership to match what impresses that society.

With the advent of the "market-driven church," the elements of church life have become big business. The church has entered the marketplace with a vengeance, seeking to compete for the public's discretionary time and money. We want to be taken seriously as effective, efficiently run organizations with much to offer the consumer, both in the areas of education and entertainment. And our desire to impress the public has led us to make ability rather than character the essential prerequisite. Does the public admire the CEO, the marketing genius, the dynamic performer, the creative producer/director? Then we must "refunction" our church programs to include them. If we are to compete we must have the shakers and the movers, the glitz-and-glitter men, the idea guys, the talented, skillful organizers and producers. These people have what the public wants. Yet, as the numbers grow, the principle of pragmatism becomes more and more entrenched until the ability to get things done becomes more important than doing the right things. And in all the hustle of progress, the priority of demonstrated, consistent Christian character is lost. Tragically, the principle that character precedes position is often only rediscovered as part of the clean-up, when lives without integrity crumble under the weight of circumstances and temptation.

3) The modern rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers has led many churches to place a higher priority on individual involvement than on individual holiness.

One of the themes in church literature today is “turning the ministry over to the people.” This rediscovery of the Reformation distinctive of the priesthood of all believers is a welcome return to biblical life. Peter instructs each believer that “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). That all believers are to function in ministry is the clear teaching of the Scripture.

Success is measured by levels of involvement, and quantity overwhelms quality. Before the process can be brought under control, the church is faced with several people who, while zealous and willing, are unfit for the leadership role they have been given.



It is also recognized by church growth experts that churches which have higher percentages of people involved in ministry activities of whatever sort, actually grow faster and larger than those with relatively low participation levels. Unfortunately, in a desire to “grow the church” some pastors have designed programs which get people “slotted”

into ministry positions long before they have given consistent evidence of the state of their souls. By making “involvement” the goal, many churches unwittingly put unbelievers, or immature believers, into positions which give them a false confidence that they are spiritually sound. The end result is a watering down of the true work of the church—the spiritual appraisal, care, and feeding of souls—in an attempt to increase the numbers.

4) The sheer number of slots we need to fill in churches drives us to fill them with the willing, regardless of their faithfulness.

Somewhere the church bought the myth that programs are the primary purpose for its existence. I am amazed at how programs become divine, untouchable little kingdoms whose continued existence is equated with the presence of God in the church. All too often these programs, driven by personal agenda and power, grow beyond the number of available, faithful leaders. Unfortunately, no one seems to notice, and the ongoing purpose of the program becomes filling the leadership slots. Success is measured by levels of involvement, and quantity overwhelms quality. Before the process can be brought under control, the church is faced with several people who, while zealous and willing, are unfit for the leadership role they have been given.

Even in programs whose usefulness to the body is unquestioned, the pressure to fill the slots can undermine our determination to insist on spiritual character. Unfortunately, this is especially true in children’s ministries. The overwhelming need to staff Sunday school and other programs makes it easy to accept volunteers whose only qualification may be willingness. But should not those who teach our children, and stand as models of authentic Christianity, be strong examples of Christian grace? The situation in many churches will not be remedied quickly. The only

answer is a philosophy of ministry that is preoccupied with developing the biblical traits of authentic Christian character.

THE DOUBLE LOSS

We have often heard the old adage, "putting the cart before the horse." It usually describes a situation where things were done out of their proper order, resulting in a failure to accomplish the task, or reach the goal. But it also describes a double loss: both the horse and the cart become useless, since neither is in a position to succeed. When the principle that character precedes position is forgotten, the result is also a double loss: Both the individual and the church suffer, and, ultimately, the testimony of Christ is opened up to ridicule.

THE PLIGHT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

While the damage inflicted on the church as a result of unqualified leadership is often more apparent, let's first look at what is not so readily seen: the personal consequences suffered by the individual who is put into leadership without sufficient maturity to support it.

If the corporate adage is true that "the key to most managerial problems is the right person in the right place," then the converse is true as well: most of our problems come from having the wrong person in a place of leadership or influence. The gravest problems we pastors face involve people who, though spiritually immature and visibly inconsistent, are given positions of leadership and influence. As we have all discovered to our chagrin, while challenge and adversity tend to strengthen the faithful, they only exacerbate the weaknesses of the spiritually immature.

Placing a person into a position of influence before he has demonstrated consistent Christian character is a mistake for which there is no excuse. The Scripture is clear

about the probability that such a move will only bring disaster. Consider these four reasons:

1) The pride which so often accompanies position is a powerful menace, even to the mature believer. In the immature it is disastrous.

Paul was very clear that the office of eldership was not to be given to those who were new converts lest they "become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the Devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). It is interesting to watch how position affects the mature and the immature. The immature usually assume their fitness for the position, overestimating their ability and underestimating the challenge. This pride hastens their undoing. To the mature, the expectations of the position often overwhelm their sense of fitness, and cause them to depend more fully on Christ. This sincere dependence becomes the foundation for successful leadership and ministry. For the immature, their pride and sense of independence ultimately leads to their undoing.

2) Leadership brings with it a greater level of expectation and accountability which can overwhelm those with inconsistent character.

Jesus said, "And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (Luke 12:48). In the same way, James reminded his readers of the stricter standards which applied to those who occupy a teaching position (James 3:1). Practically speaking, anyone who has ever been in a position of leadership knows that the spotlight of expectation is a bright one. It tends to illuminate areas of weakness, making them more visible to all. This regularly invites criticism which is difficult even for the mature Christian to handle with grace and humility. All too often, those who face the battle of personal criticisms without having a solid foundation of maturing Christian graces, develop deep seated roots of bitterness, anger, and even

vengeance. James warns that trials bring out an individual's true nature and character, and in all too many cases, that character is found to be lacking.

3) Character deficiency is the external evidence of an individual's lack of biblical knowledge and personal application of biblical truth.

That a leader is deficient in the knowledge and application of biblical truth is bad. But what may be even worse is that this lack will demonstrate itself in an inability to bring the truth of God's Word to bear on the decisions and problems involved in ministry.



Christian character is the product of biblical truth understood and driven into the heart. James states that those who exhibit bitter jealousy and unselfish ambition have, in their arrogance, "lied against the truth" (James 3:14). He goes on to describe the wisdom which is of heavenly origin in terms of the character it produces in people (3:17-18). This wisdom is characterized throughout the Bible as the truth which God has declared and revealed. One dramatic example is found in Proverbs 1-7 which may be called a "Primer for Life." Here, over and over, the father instructs his son to fear the Lord, and not despise knowledge. In Proverbs 2:1-6 the son is instructed to seek

diligently for "wisdom" which is also described as the "fear of the Lord" and "the knowledge of God." Why? Because it is undeniable that the truths which are driven deeply into the soul become the foundation of character. "As he thinks within himself, so is he," is the writer's description of the selfish man (Prov. 23:6-7). Jesus taught this principle as well. In Matthew 15:17-20 He boldly challenges the Pharisees' understanding of defilement by stating that it is the internal values of the heart which produce an unclean man. Thus, where inconsistent character is evident there must be a corresponding lack of biblical understanding and application.

That a leader is deficient in the knowledge and application of biblical truth is bad. But what may be even worse is that this lack will demonstrate itself in an inability to bring the truth of God's word to bear on the decisions and problems involved in ministry. The problem compounds itself. When challenges arise and decisions need to be made, no amount of personal insight or energy can make up for not knowing Scripture.

4) Those who do not lead from the platform of spiritual maturity and consistent character often experience deep discouragement leading to bitterness, anger and eventual resignation. Spiritually speaking, they end up in worse shape than they began.

Investing leadership authority in an unqualified person will most often lead them into spiritual decline. The pressures of leadership, the presence of criticism, and their pride-driven desire for success will most certainly overwhelm their weak spiritual foundation. As the pressures and obstacles mount, they will usually respond in sinful ways, displaying a spirit of anger, personal kingdom-building, bitterness, and manipulation rather than a deepening reliance on God, a spirit of cooperation, and a desire to build His kingdom. Rather than clothe themselves in

humility as Peter suggests, they find out firsthand the terrible truth: "God is opposed to the proud" (1 Peter 5:5). Without the proper tools of Christian character, they are personally unable to carry out the demands of their position. More often than not, they resign in a manner designed to let everyone know that, indications to the contrary, they did everything right. Their pride and self-centered agenda shine through to the end.

But as bad as all this appears, what is worse is the core value which these individuals take away with them: "It is impossible to deal with people, and I will never invest my time and talents in ministry again!" With hearts hardened by pride and anger, these who were once considered as valuable contributors to the leadership community, are now spiritual reclamation projects. And the salvage job is made even more difficult because relationships and trust have been assassinated in the process.

Who is to blame? Primarily, we have met the enemy and it is us. While it is true that each believer is responsible for his own deeds and growth in grace, it is also true that pastors who do not intentionally devote themselves to teaching and promoting consistent Christian character as an essential prerequisite to leadership are to blame as well. If our task is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry," we must not, in the name of progress, set them up for failure by exposing them to leadership challenges which will certainly overwhelm their weaknesses.

THE PLIGHT OF THE CHURCH

When pastors place talent above proven character in their list of criteria for leadership, the result is disastrous for the church. Paul, in Romans 2:17-28, discusses the consequence of leaders whose lives demonstrate the shallowness of their godliness: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." While having

direct application to the hypocritical Jewish teachers, the principle extends to our day and our churches: Leadership without character brings shame to the name of God. On the practical level, this happens for the following reasons.

How many times have we seen situations where an unqualified person has taken charge of a certain ministry area or project, and in order to staff it he has recruited helpers whose fitness is even more questionable than his own? This explains how ministries get staffed by those whose marriages are falling apart, whose doctrinal positions are highly suspect, and whose very salvation is open to question. When the principle of godly character is sacrificed on the altar of progress and programing, it is not God's kingdom that is served.



1) Unqualified leaders tend to recruit unqualified help, leading to widespread spiritual chaos in their area of ministry.

As mentioned above, a lack of character is rooted in a less than adequate understanding and application of bibli-

cal truth. Without the "guardrails" of biblical discernment, leadership choices are made which further compound the leadership problem. How many times have we seen situations where an unqualified person has taken charge of a certain ministry area or project, and in order to staff it he has recruited helpers whose fitness is even more questionable than his own? This explains how ministries get staffed by those whose marriages are falling apart, whose doctrinal positions are highly suspect, and whose very salvation is open to question. When the principle of godly character is sacrificed on the altar of progress and programing, it is not God's kingdom that is served. Where God is behind a ministry, He will raise up the spiritually mature leaders necessary to its success. Where there is a shortage of godly leadership, only the arrogant continue the program.

2) Unqualified leaders undermine scriptural standards for leadership through poor modeling.

It is all too true that people learn best by example, especially children. Leaders who lack proven character have a very powerful life message which, incrementally, instills in the minds of those around them that God blesses talent and/or willingness rather than faithfulness. Simply put, the roar of what we tolerate will drown out the message of what we appreciate. We cannot allow unqualified leaders to continue while we promote the high standards the Bible has established for spiritual leadership. If God is to bless our churches, what we believe and teach must match what we do. And the lives of those who teach and lead must measure up to Scripture.

3) Unqualified leaders undermine spiritual unity and promote strife because they do not willingly receive correction.

This may well be the most practical reason for pastors to consider carefully the character of those they invest with spiritual leadership and influence. By virtue of their weak

character, lack of biblical knowledge, and high sense of personal agenda, most spiritually immature people are not coachable. They perceive suggestion as condemnation, direction as heavy-handedness, commendation as manipulation, instruction as indictment, and reproof or correction as dictatorial rule. They create an environment in which attempts to interact with their leadership style and activity are rebuffed, or are turned into situations of conflict. Ultimately, they force people to take sides, and the "competition" creates spiritual division in the body. More than anything else, this division makes the name of Christ a subject of ridicule to the watching world.

THE COST OF PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

The health of the church is seldom far from the minds of us pastors. Even in the best of times, there are areas of concern and challenge which drive us to think more deeply, and implore the Lord for wisdom. And many of us have seldom seen the best of times. If asked, most pastors would say that their most constant sources of discouragement are people who, while having influence and position, lack consistent maturing Christian graces.

What can be done? Indeed, what must be done? The elements and sequence of the work of Scripture given in 2 Timothy 3:16, so useful in setting an order for doing the gospel ministry, point the way for us in this area as well. What follows is a general prescription for putting the exhortations of this article into action.

TEACHING

Dedicate sufficient time and energy to measure the premise of this article by the truth of Scripture. The passages listed previously provide a starting point. Pound the truth of the Word deeply down into your heart and mind, and fortify your conviction that character must precede position.

Discuss with your elder team the results of your study, taking whatever time necessary to create uniformity of purpose in this area. Then, dedicate yourself to the necessity of reaffirming the priority of character over talent and/or willingness. Make this reaffirmation a constant, non negotiable, and intentional lens through which you view the selection of leaders. Make it foundational in your paradigm of church life and leadership.

The twin terrors of pragmatism and compromise will tempt you to postpone, or even overlook, the need to shepherd those allotted to your care as those who will give an account. Whether the need is removal from position, or just spiritual pruning, action must be taken. Prayer, wise counsel, careful study and meditation on relevant passages of Scripture, common sense, and most of all, a love for the testimony of Christ and the individual, are our allies in this. Use them.



REPROOF

There is a dangerous side to adopting what I have been saying. It is the rare church that is not hobbled by unquali-

fied people who occupy positions of leadership. Perhaps your study with the elder team will bring to light what some of them already knew: that some among your number ought not to be elders, and that some other leaders in the church are, in reality, unqualified. Here is where our character as pastors will be tested.

While the decision may be easy, implementation may well be excruciating. For reasons listed above, confronting and correcting those who lack Christian character almost always escalates into anger and conflict. The twin terrors of pragmatism and compromise will tempt you to postpone, or even overlook, the need to shepherd those allotted to your care as those who will give an account. Whether the need is removal from position, or just spiritual pruning, action must be taken. Prayer, wise counsel, careful study and meditation on relevant passages of Scripture, common sense, and most of all, a love for the testimony of Christ and the individual, are our allies in this. Use them. Do what is necessary; do it gently (2 Tim. 2:25) and courageously, but do it. Our pastoral duty is one of bringing the truth of God's word to bear on the situations and problems of life, and we must be faithful, especially in the area of safeguarding the integrity of spiritual leadership in the church.

CORRECTION

If, when confronted, an individual in leadership responds from a heart prepared and broken by God, your task will become one of joy rather than sorrow. As David's response to Nathan proved to be a turning point in the king's life, your gentle confrontation with truth may become the foundation of real discipleship. It may well be that your insight into an individual's life corresponds with the Spirit's plow, and the result is a field prepared to welcome your words. In such cases, realistic appraisal, confession, repen-

tance, and a renewed desire for Christ will be evident, paving the way for spiritual growth and increased usefulness.

The individual's response to correction will, in great degree, determine future action. A response of agreement and repentance presents an opportunity for spiritual correction and growth. On the other hand, where correction is met with anger, bitterness, and a divisive spirit, the issue is decided. Removal and perhaps discipline become necessary.

TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

As part of your personal mission as pastor, you must dedicate yourself to a character-producing ministry. A preoccupation with the elements of Christian character must drive your preaching and personal exhortations. Your life must model it, and your programs must aim at it. If "everything rises and falls on leadership" you must be the captain of character, both personally and in your church. By so doing you will both increase the spiritual effectiveness of your ministry, and reduce the spiritual drag stemming from those who, while having conspicuous deficiencies in character, occupy positions of leadership and influence.

A FINAL THOUGHT

So much is written today about the need for churches to define their mission, their vision, their purpose. I have seen many vision statements, both in the corporate world and in the church. Unfortunately, they often look the same. They usually speak to the growth and success of the organization as determined by the focus of corporate energy in specific areas or tasks. I challenge you to rethink the purpose of the church along the lines of producing Christian character. Is not the goal of your teaching and preaching the growth of Christian character in our people? Is not evangelism really an attempt to bring new life, with its demonstrable character, to those dead in sin? Would not

your children's ministries, youth programs, and even adult ministries become so much more focused if the goal was growing, visible, recognizable traits of Christian character? It must not be that numbers, nirvana or noise become the standards by which we measure the success of your ministry. Rather, you must ask: Was the truth of God taught and demonstrated with and through character, and was the motivation to increased character transferred to those who came? If someone comes up with a way to weave the quest for Christian character into your church's vision statement, let us know. We all need it.

Author

David W. Hegg is senior pastor of Corona Evangelical Free Church, Corona, California. He was educated at Master's College and Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon. He has been a frequent reviewer of books for *Reformation & Revival Journal*.