

Coach's Corner

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“Character-Based Leadership”

I have now had the privilege of serving as a pastor for over two decades. In that time there are some trends among pastor/elders which I have picked up on and which I believe our congregation has avoided. I pray that this avoidance will continue. Let me explain.

First, among pastor/elders who have been through formal training and serve on the staff of a church, there can be a tendency (if they are not careful) to think that the degree, the spiritual gifts, the calling, and the association credential are enough. These realities can give room for a man to be somewhat careless in his character. Aside from the major moral failures which have been in the news (which are not indicative of most pastors I have met), the areas where it is easy to be careless are, for example, things like complaining and anger. Countless times I have heard pastors complain about their congregations, the hard things which are happening, and what people are “doing to me”. Also, countless times, I have seen pastors easily and quickly slip into sinful anger and justify it. (Let me be honest and say that I have been guilty of both of these sins!) Now, I am not saying that there is never an element of truth in what is said. What I am saying is that in these situations there is usually a lack of faith in God and the fact that God is sovereign and orchestrating all things together for our good. What is more, we pastors must remember that whatever skills or training we may have do not “make up for” our negligence in matters of character.

Next, among pastor/elders who serve on boards—elected by churches—I have noticed a tendency to settle for men who are merely breathing and who can be talked into serving on a board. Yet, these men have no idea what an elder is to be or do, nor do they have any idea of the qualifications of an elder. In these situations there is a tendency to justify the lack of meeting qualifications. After all, “We must fill this slot!”

With both the vocational pastor/elder tendency, as well as the board pastor/elder tendency, there is a similar problem: a lack of considering the qualifications for elders as mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (and Titus 1:6-9). Notice the qualifications which Paul mentions to Timothy: above reproach, a one-woman man, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but instead gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, managing well his own household, not a recent convert, and well-thought-of by outsiders. Notice that out of this list there are only two qualifications which address skills (which might be learned in formal education such as seminary or through a man’s on-the-job-training): able to teach and one who can manage his house (and the church) well. The rest of the qualifications have to do with character.

Since pastor/elders are called to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2) and since we will some day stand before God and give an account of our ministry over the flock (Heb. 13:17), it is very important that we choose men to be elders who meet these qualifications and who understand the importance and nature of the task. Bottom-line, Christian leadership is very much character-based, not merely skill-based. Such character takes time to develop and time for current elders to discern in other aspiring elders.

Men, I am so thankful that we have solid men as pastor/elders in this church who have strong character. I am also thankful that I am following a pastor-teacher who, for 14 years, modeled such strong character-based leadership. Let's keep in mind these qualifications as we pray about, look for, and train aspiring elders for future ministry in our church. Nothing will bless or help our congregation flourish more than a high bar for character-based eldership.

Finally, as you and I pray about our own elder ministry, let's ask God to help us run with endurance the character-based race that is set before us of leading and shepherding this wonderful church!

Joyfully pastoring and overseeing the flock with you,

Tom