

LEADERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

At first, glance the pattern of leadership in Baptist, churches looks simple. There is usually a minister who is sometimes called the pastor. He or she is supported by a team of other leaders, the most prominent of whom are the church secretary and the treasurer. They are often deacons and serve with others on the diaconate, the title for the six or more people who are elected to this office. There may be other leaders called elders in some churches. This smaller group seem to have a more significant role in the spiritual aspects of leadership. How do these different roles relate to each other and what thinking shapes this style of church government?

WHO RULES

Jesus acted as a leader among his followers. His authority lay, not in bossiness, but in servant-hood shown in the way of life he led, the truth he spoke and in his dedication to serving God and people. So he set the pattern and determined how his church must think about leadership today. Baptists are committed to trying to work this out. (Luke 22:27; see also John 13:1-17).

Every church is under the direct rule of Jesus Christ, God's son. We know his presence by his Spirit, who will always lead us in ways that agree with the principles set out in the Bible. The task the members must all share in is to find out both what God wants and how he wants them to do it.

We believe that a right understanding of any issue is found through the prayerful consultation of all those committed to one another in membership of a church. This consultation, called the church meeting by Baptist Christians, is the gathering where they decide matters of policy and leadership. Together they seek the 'mind of Christ' in the consensus reached by those present.

This is possible because Christ's Spirit lives in all true believers, but if it is to work properly members need both to prepare for the meeting and to be present at it. Then they must speak boldly the ideas that have come to their minds and listen to what other sisters and brothers have to say. Through this listening and reflection a consensus emerges and the meeting affirms the guidance given. Leaders are appointed in this way and in this way too the church meeting arranges all matters concerned with leadership.

LEADERS WHO HELP THINGS HAPPEN

Different people serve in various roles among believers. Key among them are leaders in the church's life. From the New Testament we learn of several kinds of leadership that enable the church to follow God's ways to greater effect. The words used to describe leaders point to the functions carried out by them rather than to their position. Some of the words have become the usual titles we use for office-holders in the church. Christians borrowed these titles from the social world in which the first churches were set. Some came from the Jewish background and others from the Greek or Roman world of city government and pagan religion. These differences probably explain the fact there is no one pattern of church order in the New Testament. It is clear in both the words and the stories of the New Testament that leaders did not just give orders; they were action people themselves.

It is notable that the title 'priest', which was common to Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures, was never used by the first Christians for a church leader or office-holder. The significance of this is that it was the believers who exercised priesthood together in bringing the world to God and God to the world (1 Peter 2:9). All were priests, not only the leaders. Leaders had the responsibility of enabling the church to fulfil that task. God gave them no mystical powers beyond those all believers shared. Their distinctiveness lay in their calling to particular duties to strengthen the church.

APPROPRIATE CANDIDATES

The story of the first Christian churches in the New Testament shows us that all kinds of people become leaders among the believers. God does not confine his gifts and call to certain classes or people. In Christ he freed some who were previously oppressed. The church was radically different in the way it allowed women to lead alongside men. Junias, it seems, was an outstanding apostle

(Rom 16:7). Phoebe was a key deacon in the church at Cenchrea (Rom 16:1). Priscilla exercised an effective teaching ministry with her husband at great risk to their well-being (Rom 16:3; Acts 18:26). Philip's daughters exercised a prophetic ministry in the early days (Acts 21:9). Social convention placed some limitations on them exercising leadership, but the principle of opportunity for all was firmly established by the gospel (Gal 3:28).

Within the new community of the church people from different classes in society were equally eligible for service. However, not many high-born or formally educated people were found in the fellowship. There were house-holders in whose homes the church usually met and it is possible that some of the leaders came from this group (Col 4:17 and Philem 1). Older people, the elders, occupied leadership roles. The title, in both Greek and Jewish backgrounds, carried with it the sense that people valued the wisdom and experience of the years. Yet this did not exclude younger people from leadership. Timothy, Titus and probably James and John were younger leaders of great significance. People who were once totally opposed to the gospel (like Paul) and those who failed as Christians (like Peter and Mark) were, on restoration, called to be leaders.

TESTED AND APPROVED

The church required leaders to model certain qualities of character and lifestyle (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9). The primary qualification was a mature spirituality that demonstrated an awareness of the grace of God in daily living. This was expected to show in the relationships they lived in at home and in the world. Similarly the basic attitudes that shaped their behaviour needed to be those that anyone could follow safely without risk to their fellowship with God.

On top of this the church expected leaders to have abilities given by God. These needed development through spiritual exercise so that they could guide the church in its work. Some of these abilities and the manner in which they are to be used are described in Romans 12:3-8 and similar passages.

QUALITIES REQUIRED OF LEADERS

Spiritually

- not a recent convert
- not liable to fall
- able to teach
- loyal to apostolic truth
- willing to care
- proven spiritual standing
- a servant attitude

Personally

- Integrity
- self-discipline
- gentle, not argumentative
- financially straight
- encouraging

Socially

- hospitable
- faithful in marriage
- competent as a parent
- respected by non-Christians

PARTICULAR CALLINGS

While there is no one pattern of leadership shared by all the New Testament churches, the key local leaders came to be called either elders, bishops or deacons.

Elders

This title was probably adopted from the Jewish model where a group of elected people directed the life of the synagogue. In the church their task was to oversee the life and development of the congregation. In Acts 20 Paul, in an emotional speech, tells the elders that their God-given task is to nurture and protect the members. He implies that he functioned as an elder while in Ephesus.

In recent years Baptists have begun to use this title again for some, appointed by church meetings, to a spiritual oversight of a church. Sometimes the division of responsibilities between elders and deacons (see below) is seen as spiritual versus administrative. It is difficult to justify a hard distinction from the Bible and it underplays the spiritual value of good administration. Often the minister is seen to be a kind of elder.

Bishops

The title is probably the Greek equivalent of elder and it is likely that the terms are almost interchangeable. Yet whenever bishop is used the ability to teach is invariably mentioned. It remains possible that bishops were the teaching elders in the early churches. Our Baptist forefathers understood it like this and it is from such a basis that we have developed the role of the minister or pastor. It is quite natural that those whose task is to declare God's word should become the focus of leadership, because the church orders its life by scripture. Paul expected preaching elders to be paid by the church (1 Tim 5:17-18). The principle seems to have been that the church supported any who spent all their time serving the gospel.

Deacons

There is no job description given in the New Testament for those called to be deacons. Indeed, it is not even clear when the office came into being. The passage usually quoted (Acts 6) does not mention deacons as officers and those appointed to a particular task in that passage are later called elders (Acts 11:30): The impression given is that deacons work alongside other leaders in the oversight of the church, helping and taking responsibility with them. The same personal qualities of character were required of deacons as for elders and bishops.

In later history, and in the development of the Baptist church, deacons came to be the management group around the minister. They shared with him or her the overall responsibility for leading the church. The particular tasks used to be related to caring for people in the church, but more recently they have become the practical administrators who support the minister and elders.

THE CUSTOMARY MINISTRY OF A DEACON

Caring for the fellowship by

- developing a system of pastoral care
- accompanying the pastor on some visits
- getting to know members of the church
- welcoming visitors to the church
- visiting those applying for membership
- praying regularly for the fellowship

Leading In the fellowship by

- participating in deacons' meetings
- contributing to church meetings
- serving and praying at the Lord's Table
- leading small groups
- leading in worship and preaching, according to gift

Caring for the pastor by

- giving encouragement

- committed prayer
- providing opportunities for study
- ensuring an adequate salary
- ensuring time off
- providing secretarial assistance and other support.

LEADERSHIP TEAMS

From what is said above it is clear that elders worked in groups. The possibility that there was more than one elder in each church remains. It might be that groups of congregations in a city formed the church and that each congregation had one elder. Acts 6 is interesting in that it shows us how leaders work as groups and are appointed by the whole body acting together for the better ordering of its life.

The idea of corporate responsibility has been significant in our Baptist understanding of the church. It remains important for the way that leadership is appointed and held accountable to the church meeting.

ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD

The checks and balances that corporate responsibility brings is seen in the relationships between the churches in the New Testament. The commending of travelling leaders is recorded in numerous places. The testing of the call and the recognition of competent service was clearly important for those vulnerable groups of Christians. They came to rely on the judgement of other churches with whom they were linked.

Such trust is expressed today in the fellowship of the Baptist Union and the local Associations. The recognition and commendation of ministers and other leaders happens for the sake of good order and sound leadership. We are accountable to God in these matters. Great care has to be taken when appointing and training leaders to serve in the church. Each member has a part to take in this task by praying for them and supporting them in their work.

Malcolm Goodspeed

The Baptist Union of Great Britain

Baptist House

PO Box 44

129 Broadway

Didcot

Oxfordshire

OX11 8RT

Tel: 01235 517700

Fax: 01235 517715

Email: baptistunion@baptist.org.uk

Website: www.baptist.org.uk

