



Characteristics of Church Leaders

Thus far, this series has presented several biblical insights about church leaders and leadership plans.

- Part 1 gave an overview of various types of church leadership (congregational, presbyterian, elder board rule, senior pastor, house church, professional clergy, and plurality of elders).
- Part 2 noted the interchangeability of the leadership terms *elder*, *overseer*, *bishop*, *shepherd*, and *pastor* and demonstrated that these terms are scriptural names for the same group of church leaders.
- Part 3 indicated that the New Testament pattern of church leadership was a plurality of elders who jointly provided spiritual oversight in and for a church family.
- Part 4 reviewed singular leaders in the Bible as well as when and how the singular leader concept was introduced to the church.
- Part 5 focused on the most important aspect of church leadership, the fact that Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church.

This study highlights characteristics of church leaders and does not review the specific leadership qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. As a point of clarification, “characteristic” is defined as a distinguishing trait, while “qualification” is defined as a standard that must be met. [Part 7 of this series will deal with the scriptural qualifications of church leaders.]

INTRODUCTION

If you were asked to list key characteristics of church leaders, could you do so? Do church leaders have common characteristics that are recognizable world-wide in the Body of Christ?

Part 2 of this series showed that the term “elder” highlights the maturity or character of leader. Consequently, there is a direct correlation between leadership characteristics and the areas in which every believer is to grow in Christ. As a result, this study not only highlights foundational characteristics of church leaders but also provides encouragement for your own Christ-like development.

JESUS CHRIST IS OUR MATCHLESS EXAMPLE

Authentic followers of the Lord Jesus Christ know that He is the one and only perfect example for life. In response to who He is and what He accomplished on their behalf, believers desire Christ-like characteristics to be increasingly evidenced in their lives.

Of all the characteristics that Christ displayed, which are the most important? Consider what Jesus emphasized when He described His own character in Matthew 11:28-30. He said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle (*meek*) and humble (*lowly*) in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” [underlining and explanations added] . . . All verses in this study are from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.

As the sovereign Lord and creator, the ruler of all things, Jesus indicates that His most distinctive characteristics to be emulated are not His authority, knowledge, or power but, instead, His meekness and humility. Believers are to become more like Jesus Christ with regard to these traits. This involves developing and maintaining a bond-servant’s attitude in all aspects of life. Becoming a bond-servant is closely associated with “humbling one’s self.” In fact, Philippians chapter 2 uses both “bond-servant” and “humility” to describe Jesus.

Philippians 2:5-11, Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. [underlining added]

A Christian leader should strive to have the same servant attitude as Christ, but a bond servant's perspective is not for leaders alone. Following our Lord's example, every believer should also strive to think and live as a Christ-like bond-servant.

BECOMING GREAT DEPENDS ON GREATER SERVICE

In learning to be a bond-servant, a believer should strive for greatness. Biblical greatness, however, is very different from the secular concept of greatness. The secular concept of greatness in leadership emphasizes over/under positional authority which, more often than not, enhances a leader's power and prestige. This concept is diametrically opposed to the biblical understanding of Christ-like servanthood.

Greatness in the Body of Christ is demonstrated by service, not privilege or rank. Jesus repeatedly emphasized this truth to His disciples. He rebuked them on more than one occasion for trying to climb over one another in an effort to gain recognition and honor. In rebuking His disciples for trying to "claim the highest seat," He repeatedly emphasized their need for humility and a servant's attitude.

Matthew 20:25-28, But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them.²⁶ It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Matthew 23:5-12 (*in speaking of the Pharisees*), But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of *their garments*.⁶ They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues,⁷ and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.⁸ But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.⁹ Do not call *anyone* on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.¹⁰ Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, *that is*, Christ.¹¹ But the greatest among you shall be your servant.¹² Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. [*explanation added*]

Mark 9:35, Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

Mark 10:41-45, Hearing *this*, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.⁴² Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them.⁴³ But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Luke 22:24-27 (*at the Last Supper*), And there arose also a dispute among them *as to* which one of them was regarded to be greatest.²⁵ And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'²⁶ But *it is* not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.²⁷ For who is greater, the one who reclines *at the table* or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines *at the table*? But I am among you as the one who serves. (*explanation added*)

John 13:12-17, So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined *at the table* again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?¹³ You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for *so* I am.¹⁴ If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.¹⁵ For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

The above passages point out key differences between worldly and Christ-like leadership.

- Worldly leadership emphasizes authority over others, but Christ-like leadership emphasizes serving those who need oversight and care.
- Worldly leadership is accompanied by titles, but Christ-like leadership is accompanied by a towel.
- Worldly leadership brings attention to those in power, but Christ-like leadership brings attention to those in need.
- Worldly leadership expects to be served as a reward, but Christ-like leadership finds reward in service.

Living as a Christ-like servant is a basic characteristic of a true church leader. Correspondingly, every believer is also to mature as a bond-servant as part of the normal Christian life.

THE PROCESS OF CHRIST-LIKE GROWTH

Consistent growth in Christ includes maintaining a bond-servant attitude, especially when dealing with challenges of life and relationships. These challenges can be related to a believer's gender, age, health, geographical location, friends and enemies, marital status, cultural traditions, economic level, political climate, family situations, employment, and religious freedom or persecution ... and this is not an exhaustive list.

Even though believers can face different situations in life, growing in Christ involves a common process for every believer. Believers who love God and want to be more like Jesus will, for example, obey God's Word out of love for the Lord (John 14:23-24, 1 John 5:3), abide in Christ (John 15:4-11, 1 John 3:24), be wise in dealing with unbelievers (Colossians 4:5-6), be prepared to share the Good News of Christ (1 Peter 3:15), and be faithful in prayer (Philippians 4:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

John 14:23-24, Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. ²⁴ He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me.

1 John 5:3, For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

John 15:4-11, Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples. ⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

1 John 3:24, The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

Colossians 4:5-6, Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. ⁶ Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

1 Peter 3:15, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence

Philippians 4:6, Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

1 Thessalonians 5:17, pray without ceasing

RESULTS OF CHRIST-LIKE GROWTH

The basics for Christ-like growth are the same for all believers, and some believers will mature in Christ to such a degree that fellow believers will recognize them as servant leaders in the church. For example, all believers who continue to grow in Christ will display the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23, But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Believers who continue to grow in Christ will demonstrate biblical love.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails ...

Believers who continue to grow in Christ will regard others as more important than themselves.

Philippians 2:3-4, Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Believers who continue to grow in Christ will live in a manner that reflects their high calling in Christ. They will be united with fellow believers and will diligently preserve the unity and peace that characterizes the Body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-6, Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³ being

diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Believers who continue to grow in Christ will minister faithfully in accordance with their spiritual giftedness.

Romans 12:4-6a, For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly* . . .

Believers who continue to grow in Christ will be lovingly devoted to one another in many ways, and the Body of Christ will be built up accordingly.

Romans 12:10-13, *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹ not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³ contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.*

Romans 14:19, So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

Ephesians 4:14-16, As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Believers who continue to grow in Christ will faithfully express Christ-like love in the Body of Christ. [Review dozens of examples that highlight “one another” interactions in [Body Life – Healthy or Sick](#)]

Believers who are growing in Christ will work with other believers in a mutually beneficial manner as they minister harmoniously for the glory of God. [See [Teamwork: Body Building with Divine Purposes](#)]

Believers who are growing in Christ will help restore those in the Body who are overtaken in specific sin(s).

Galatians 6:1-2, Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. ² Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Believers who are growing in Christ will speak in a manner that honors Him. For example, a believer’s normal daily communication will demonstrate Christ’s character even when loving admonition to fellow believers becomes necessary.

Romans 15:14, And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.

Ephesians 4:29, Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

SERVANT LEADERS UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Believers who mature in Christ become spiritually equipped to help others come to Christ and, subsequently, grow in Christ. Mature believers will eventually assist fellow believers to live all of life according to Christ’s commands. Helping fellow believers in this manner is the same as disciplining them.

Matthew 22:19-20, Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Disciplers, like shepherds, desire the best food for the sheep and will direct them away from unwholesome food. In other words, faithful disciplers will instruct others in God’s Word and protect them from false shepherds and false teaching. Faithful disciplers will also place themselves, spiritually speaking, between fellow believers and anything or anyone detrimental to on-going development in Christ.

By remaining a faithful discipler of other believers, a follower of Christ may eventually be recognized by “fellow sheep” as a servant leader in the flock. This acknowledgment does not indicate Christ-like perfection in a discipler, but it does indicate a consistent, Christ-oriented “project under construction” that reflects Christ as a result of faithfully obeying the Word of God.

SHEEP AND SHEPHERDS

In the Body of Christ, there is a key distinction in leadership as it relates to shepherd and sheep. There is only One

Shepherd in the Body of Christ who has authority over His flock, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Part 5 in this series: *Jesus Christ is Head of His Church*). Servant leaders (the under-shepherds) in the flock are themselves members of the flock and, as such, know that they are sheep overseeing other sheep, not sheep dogs dominating or lording it over other sheep.

Recognizing the commonality of being members of Christ's flock, a servant leader will have no tendency to exercise lordship over the flock. Instead, a growing disciple of Christ will have a heartfelt desire to reflect Christ-like humility and service to fellow members of the flock. Ray Stedman addressed this issue in the following manner:

“No individual has authority from God to direct the affairs of the church. A plurality of elders is necessary as a safeguard to the all-too-human tendency to play God over other people. Even then, the authority exercised is not one of domination and arbitrary decree over anyone. The ability of a servant to influence anyone else does not lie in ordering someone around, but by obtaining their voluntary consent. This is the nature of all authority among Christians, even that of the Lord himself! He does not force our obedience, but obtains it by love, expressed either in circumstantial discipline or by awakening gratitude through the meeting of our desperate needs.

“The true authority of elders and other leaders in the church, then, is that of respect, aroused by their own loving and godly example. This is the force of two verses which are often cited by those who claim a unique authority of pastors over church members. The first is found in First Thessalonians 5:12-13a (RSV), ‘But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.’ The key phrase is ‘and are over you in the Lord.’ The Greek word in question is *prohistamenous*. Though this is translated ‘over you’ in both the Revised Standard and King James versions, the word itself contains no implication of being ‘over’ another. The New English Bible more properly renders it, ‘... and in the Lord's fellowship are your leaders and counselors.’ The thought in the word is that of ‘standing before’ others, not of ‘ruling over’ them. It is the common word for leadership. Leaders can lead only if they are able to persuade some to follow.

“Another verse used to support command authority is Hebrews 13:17a (RSV), which the Revised Standard Version renders, ‘Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.’ The imperative translated ‘obey’ is from the word *peitho*, ‘to persuade.’ In the middle voice, used here, Thayer's lexicon gives its meaning as ‘to suffer one's self to be persuaded.’ Again there is no thought of a right to command someone against his will, but the clear thrust is that leaders are persuaders whose ability to persuade arises not from a smooth tongue or a dominant personality, but from *a personal walk which evokes respect.*”¹

LEADERSHIP RECOGNITION

Followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, both men and women, acquire His characteristics as they mature in Him. To repeat an earlier observation . . . growing in Jesus is the “normal Christian life” for all believers, which prepares some to become Christ-like servant leaders in a church family. The key foundational characteristic for a believer to be recognized as a servant leader in the family of God is to become more and more like Jesus, the Supreme Servant.

As believers mature in Christ, they will faithfully remind others of God's truth, providing encouragement or admonition from God's Word as needed. Believers who become more like Christ will not be in bondage to any sin(s) and will be above reproach before believers and unbelievers alike. A believer who is eventually recognized to be a potential elder (pastor/shepherd, bishop/overseer) is a wholehearted disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. As such, he will have lived and ministered in such a way that the specific elder qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not to be obtained or developed later but are, instead, firmly in place.

Part 7 in this series will highlight the specific qualifications listed in 1 Timothy, chapter 3, and Titus, chapter 1 for an elder (bishop, overseer, pastor, shepherd).

FOOTNOTE

¹[A Pastor's Authority](#) by Ray Stedman

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFERENCE

[The Top Ten Character Tests of a Leader](#) by Bill Lawrence