

## Chapter Eleven

# WHO IS FIT TO LEAD?

Obviously, a complaint like that can easily become a wedge that splits the church. As any church leader, will testify, no matter how petty such murmuring may appear, it always has the potential for great mischief. In this case, it may have been true that some of the Grecian widows were being overlooked. Obviously, it wasn't intentional, but the situation needed to be corrected.

So, the apostles responded quickly. Luke described what happened:

**Acts 6:2-7 (NASB)**

<sup>2</sup>“So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

<sup>3</sup>Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

<sup>4</sup>“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

<sup>5</sup>The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

<sup>6</sup>And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup>The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

The church had become too big for twelve leaders. Such a large community desperately needed more oversight and more organization. So, the apostles proposed a plan for the people themselves to appoint godly men with outstanding reputations to come alongside and “**serve tables,**” meaning that these men would now oversee the distribution of food and funds to those in need.

Seven men were to be singled out to serve in a subordinate leadership role. They were appointed to serve, which is normally the role of a deacon, and for that reason, commentators sometimes refer to them as the first deacons. But notice that the text does not call them deacons. At least two of them, Stephen and Philip, were also preachers, which is a role more associated with elders than with deacons (**1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9**).

**1 Timothy 3:2 (NASB)**

<sup>2</sup>“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.”

**Titus 1:9 (NASB)**

<sup>9</sup>“Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”



Of course, they're not called elders, either. This was so early in the formulation of the church that those offices did not even exist yet. When the apostle Paul listed the qualifications for deacons and elders in [1 Timothy 3](#), the only significant difference between the two offices was that elders must be gifted to teach. Elders are given the teaching authority in the church, and deacons serve under them in a support role, much the way these seven men in [Acts 6](#) were appointed to do under the apostles.

In many churches, the deaconate is somewhat of a training ground for elders. It is not uncommon in the church I pastor for deacons to become elders as they develop their skill in teaching and their ability to handle the Word. That process began here in [Acts 6](#).

As these seven men proved themselves faithful in serving, at least some of them, like Philip and Stephen, also developed skill as teachers. No doubt some of them later stepped into even greater roles of leadership as the apostles were martyred or moved on to take the gospel message to the remotest parts of the earth. As they proved their faithfulness and assumed greater leadership roles, new servant leaders would have been appointed to serve alongside them. Eventually, the teaching role was designated as the office of an elder, and the servant role was assigned to officers called deacons.

So, what we see in [Acts 6](#) are the rudimentary beginnings of church organization. The separate offices of elders and deacons are foreshadowed in this event, but they were not yet clearly defined.

From this passage, however, we learn much about how the church is to be organized and what kind of leaders ought to have oversight. At least three principles emerge that continue to set the standard for all leaders in the church. Notice the **plurality of leadership** that was prescribed; **the priority** that was recognized as leadership's first duty; and the **standard of purity** that was demanded of those who were appointed. We will examine each of these closely, because they establish principles that apply to spiritual leaders of all kinds.

## PLURALITY

The clear New Testament pattern for church government is a plurality of God-ordained men who lead the people of God together. The church is not to be led by dictators, autocrats, or solitary rulers. From the beginning, oversight was shared by twelve apostles, and we see here that when they appointed subordinate leaders, those men also functioned as a team.

When Paul and Barnabas founded churches in Asia Minor, Luke said they **"appointed elders in every church"** ([Acts 14:23](#)).

[Acts 14:23 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> **"When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."**



Paul likewise instructed Titus to **“appoint elders in every city as I commanded you”** ([Titus 1:5](#)).

**Titus 1:5 (NASB)**

<sup>5</sup>**“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.”**

At the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, **“he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church”** ([Acts 20:17](#)).

**Acts 20:17 (NASB)**

<sup>17</sup>**“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.”**

In Jerusalem, Paul met with **“James, and all the elders”** ([Acts 21:18](#)).

**Acts 21:18 (NASB)**

<sup>18</sup>**“And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.”**

Virtually every time elders are spoken of in Scripture in connection with a church, the noun is plural, clearly indicating that the standard practice in the New Testament was for multiple elders to oversee each church.

Every ministry described in the New Testament was a team effort. Jesus called twelve disciples. After Judas’s betrayal and suicide, Matthias was chosen to take his place ([Acts 1:16–26](#)).

**Acts 1:16-26 (NASB)**

<sup>16</sup>**“Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.**

<sup>17</sup> **For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.**

<sup>18</sup> **(Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.**

<sup>19</sup> **And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)**

<sup>20</sup> **For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE, AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT’; and, ‘LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.’**

<sup>21</sup> **Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—**

<sup>22</sup> **beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these *must* become a witness with us of His resurrection.**

<sup>23</sup> **So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias.**

<sup>24</sup> **And they prayed and said, ‘You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen**

<sup>25</sup> **to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’**

**<sup>26</sup> And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”**

Those twelve as apostles obviously shared oversight in the founding and early ministry of the Jerusalem church. When they began to take the gospel to “**all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth**” ([Acts 1:8](#)), they did so in teams ([Acts 15:22–27](#); [Galatians 2:9](#)).

[Acts 1:8 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>8</sup> “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”**

[Acts 15:22-27 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>22</sup> “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,**

**<sup>23</sup> and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.**

**<sup>24</sup> Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls,**

**<sup>25</sup> it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,**

**<sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>27</sup> Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.”**

[Galatians 2:9 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>9</sup> “And recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”**

Peter and John together dominate the first twelve chapters of Acts. The focus shifts to Paul and Barnabas in [Acts 13](#). Then Barnabas went with Mark, and Paul went with Silas at the end of [Acts 15](#). Timothy joined Paul and Silas in [Acts 16](#). When Paul returned to Antioch in [Acts 18](#), he took Aquila and Priscilla along.

As we have seen, Paul even took Luke and Aristarchus with him on his journey to Rome, although he was a prisoner of the Roman government at the time. A comprehensive list of all of Paul’s various companions and fellow ministers would fill a page or more.

In other words, ministry as depicted in the New Testament was never a one-man show. That does not preclude the role of a dominant leader on each team. Within the framework of plurality, there will invariably be those who have more influence. The diversity of our gifts ([1 Corinthians 12:4](#)) means all people are differently equipped.

[1 Corinthians 12:4 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>4</sup> “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.”**