Leadership speaks so much, Our Lord, to the quality of ministry we have for Your glory. You have warned us not to move too rapidly in this area. Give us not only patience but courage to set forth men to take responsibility in the household of faith. Amen.

Leaders play a vital part in the church, essential for the heart and direction of the Body. Hence, the New Testament has much to say about the nature and role of biblical leadership. Unfortunately, not every aspect of leadership which finds full expression has led to working leadership models and ecclesiastical practices.

The office of Elder and Deacon
The New Testament clearly identifies two main leadership offices in the church, that of elder and deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). The elder is also to be equated with the pastor and overseer, the three terms being used for the same person and his respective functions (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1, 2, 4). The deacons, we assume, came into existence in Acts 6 and composed a service brigade to assist the apostles and the elders (cp. Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1).

The roles exercised by these offices differed in function but not in importance. Elders have the spiritual oversight of the congregation and seem to have ruled over the flock as a plurality of leaders (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1ff). They were held accountable for the spiritual welfare of the flock. Deacons, on the other hand, played a vital part in assisting the elders with the daily material needs of the congregation which relieved the elders to attend to the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4).

The requirements for leadership, however, seem to be equally as weighty for both offices. The qualifications for elder and deacon given in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 require a man of deep spiritual maturity and tried Christian experience. The key words are "above reproach," both with the Christian community as well as the world of unbelievers. They call for men tried by the congregation, approved after much experience, and then placed into office. Deacons seem to be appointed by the congregation (Acts 6:1ff), whereas elders seem to be appointed by the apostles or other elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The question of selection is again difficult to resolve because of the absence of specific instruction. The qualifications seem to be more important than the manner of selection.

The rewards for serving in leadership include special recognition by the Lord Himself, the Chief Shepherd of the sheep. The faithful elder upon trial (Hebrews 13:17) could expect the "unfading crown of glory" from the hand of His Master (1 Peter 5:4). The deacons who served well could expect to obtain "a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 3:13).

The Selection of Elder and Deacon
In a practical sense the selection of elders and deacons by the local church is no easy task nor is it arbitrary. It must follow five steps.

1. A Personal Desire. Men who serve in office must do so voluntarily and of their own free will. Elders must "desire" the office and must serve voluntarily and not "under compulsion" (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter
Deacons were men with a heart to serve (Acts 6:1ff). In other words, the church doesn't select a man because no one else will do it or can do it. Service must come from his heart!

2. Personal Qualifications. The selection is based on the man's ability to measure up to the spiritual qualifications prescribed by the Word of God (Acts 6:1ff, 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5ff; 1 Peter 5:1-4). The man is qualified by his life, not by his abilities. The only ability under consideration is his ability to use the Word to help others.

3. Personal Testing. Leaders are not instantly produced, but slowly prepared over a course of time. Elders by the nature of their title must have years of experience before consideration for office. Deacons must first be tested, be men of trained wisdom (Acts 6:4), and then they may serve (1 Timothy 3:10). All this argues for a protracted period of time when potential elders and deacons are serving the Lord by serving His church. This on-the-job training qualifies them to hold future office. In short, these men "work their way to the top." Keep in mind that "top" in the church is "servant of all."

4. Divine Selection. God ultimately appoints the leaders. The elder was made an overseer by God (Acts 20:28). The deacon is an answer to prayer (Acts 6:1ff). Leadership is such serious business because God appoints the leaders, they are ultimately accountable to Him and face a stricter judgment (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 5:20-22).

5. Church Selection. That the congregation selects the deacons is quite clear (Acts 6:3). The selection of elders is not so defined. Wherever they are mentioned they seem to be appointed (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). However, it is safe to say that elders, if they meet the qualifications, may be selected by the congregation. A near unanimous vote is preferable.

THE ORDINATION OF ELDERS AND DEACONS

Upon selection of the respective leaders, steps should be taken to ordain these men into office. Ordination is the official installation of the elder and deacon into office, and was done in a public setting by the other leaders of the church. Ordination is a public acknowledgment of God's selection for office. Hence it is done through a public laying on of hands (a gesture of recognized or imparted authority), public prayer, and even fasting (Acts 6:7; 13:2; 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). A special service should be set aside for such an ordination. In some cases, an ordination vow is used along with a certificate of ordination.

In most churches the office of elder and pastor are kept distinct. The pastor usually is voted in by the congregation and holds the office indefinitely. The elders on the other hand, are elected for a prescribed term of office and are subject to reelection. Some churches also elect elders for an indefinite period of time. Great caution is urged here. Some churches have the elders select the new elders with ratification by the congregation.

An important key to effective leadership is to have a clear job description for each office so that both elder and deacon know the scope and limits of their function. There needs to be a clear statement of the relationships between the two offices, and which if any is accountable to the other. If the pastor is seen as a distinct office, then his role must also be clearly spelled out.

Suggested reading