EVERY CHURCH LEADER KNOWS the qualifications for elders and deacons that are spelled out in the Bible, but actually finding other leaders who fulfill the biblical qualifications can be difficult.

Thabiti Anyabwile writes from his expertise as pastor and elder, showing how to identify and reproduce legitimate leaders and willing servants throughout the ranks of the local church. Balancing thoughtful analysis of pertinent passages with thorough application for practical use in a contemporary context, Anyabwile answers the questions, “Who should we look for to lead and serve in the church?” and “What should they do to fulfill their calling?”

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A church without godly leaders is an endangered church. And a church that does not train leaders is an unfaithful church. God gives leaders to his churches for the maturity, unity, and soundness of each local congregation. Without godly, faithful, replicating leadership, churches suffer deeply.

The apostle Paul knew how important such leadership is. In 2 Timothy, the apostle writes his “child” in the faith, Timothy, with several final instructions and exhortations, including the exhortation to find good leaders. Timothy grew up under the spiritual instruction of his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice (2 Tim. 2:2, 5). He traveled, served, and learned alongside Paul. And now the apostle, near the end of his life, instructing in the “shadow of the scaffold,”1 writes with deep tenderness in almost every verse. Amidst the many jewels in this letter, one of them is Paul’s charge to find and entrust “faithful men.”

The apostle’s teaching must live on, passed from faithful hand to faithful hand. That means that the pastor must be able to spot faithful men and train them. If a man is not given to discipling others, it’s unlikely that he is called to the pastoral office.

I am the product of men who found me, probed my reliability, and entrusted me with gospel treasure. I think of Peter Rochelle. He selflessly granted me the opportunity to labor alongside him in
Introduction

planting a church. He first encouraged me to preach and teach, and his model of exposition has influenced me ever since.

Then there was Mark Dever, an unusually gifted discipler of men and teacher of God’s Word. I cannot forget his eager generosity towards me. It began on the day of my membership interview at Capitol Hill Baptist Church. He asked what I wanted to do with my life over the long term. A little intimidated, I answered, “I would love it if the Lord allowed me to pastor full-time.”

“Really?” Mark replied, eyebrow curiously raised, head slightly tilted. Then he turned to my wife and asked, “Can he teach?”

Oh no, I thought. I did not see that coming. What would she say? To my relief, “Oh, yes,” came the quick and confident reply. Mark turned to me and said, “You should call the church office and get on my calendar for regular lunches together. Let’s meet up and discuss good Christian books. You should consider my life open to you.”

I have never forgotten those words. My five years at Capitol Hill Baptist Church were marked by Mark, Michael Lawrence, Matt Schmucker, and too many men to number—not to mention the church family as a whole—pouring themselves into me, entrusting me with the things they had heard, read, seen, and learned concerning the Lord, the gospel, and his bride.

WHAT DO MULTI-LEVEL MARKETERS HAVE THAT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES DO NOT?

For a number of years, every time I visited a bookstore I seemed to be approached by someone who asked me if I was interested in “earning an extra $500 to $1,000 per month working from home only ten hours per week.” It was like I had a big sticker on my forehead reading “sucker for multi-level marketing.” They wanted me to become a part of their “down line”—to join their league of unsuspecting, gullible, get-rich-quick marketers. They were multiplying themselves in the most zealous way possible.

What do multi-level marketers possess that Christian pastors do not?
Introduction

If direct sale and multi-level marketing businesses are constantly on the lookout for prospective representatives, certainly ambassadors for Christ should be. We've been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. Having come into possession of Christ himself, it's our business and pleasure to cultivate other stewards of God's good news, stewards who will in turn find others to keep and teach the gospel.

But saying that a pastor must find and train others is the easy part. Practically, what does this look like? How is it done?

In the chapters that follow, I want to invite pastors and elders to a conversation about finding and training faithful men for the task of leadership in the church. I am no expert. I haven't been at this long, and I'm sure there are tons of men who do it better. You won't find here a ten-step process for turning spiritual duds into elder studs. You won't find a surefire formula for making any and every person a stellar leader.

Instead, what follows are brief meditations on Paul's instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3 and 4. With 1 Timothy 3, we examine the biblical qualifications for elders and deacons and ask, what kind of character must these men possess, and how can we spot it? With 1 Timothy 4, we consider Paul's charge to Timothy as a model for faithful pastoral ministry. With God's blessing, as we walk slowly through 1 Timothy 3 and 4, we will think about what qualities to search for and what duties need to be fulfilled in Christian leadership.

Much more could be said on this very important topic. Many excellent book-length resources are available to the interested reader. I hope this little volume complements these other resources by helping the already-stretched pastor who wants to cultivate other leaders but needs a conversation partner to stir up some questions and ideas.
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS BOOK?

First, use this book prayerfully. Pray for pastors and elders as they shepherd and serve the sheep. Pray for more men to be raised up in the congregation for this important work. Pray that the Lord would pour out his grace on those serving in these tasks. Pray that the members of the church would show genuine appreciation, love, and care for their shepherds. Pray that all the men in the church would grow in the qualities that elders should possess. Pray that men would have a godly desire to give their lives in serving the body of Christ as servant-leaders.

Second, use this book practically. The book does not delve into a lot of detailed argumentation, hoping instead to make application easily and quickly. I want the book to help in actually doing something—identifying and training elders—not just considering something. Put the suggestions into practice, and improve them with the experience and wisdom that come from your particular church setting and other faithful leaders.

Finally, use the book pedagogically. That is, use it to teach and instruct. Perhaps a church needs to select its first elders after a period of planning and study. Pastors may wish to use these brief chapters to “flesh out” for the average church member which qualities the congregation as a whole needs to be looking and praying for in their prospective elders. Examination and pastoral search committees may find similar help.
How to Use This Book

HOW NOT TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is not a sourcebook for leading witch hunts and rebellions against leaders. Shepherds are not perfect men. Though God sets the bar for pastoral ministry necessarily high, he uses the poles of grace to support that bar.

Users should keep the Lord’s grace in mind as they read, lest an overly critical, gospel-forgetting, judgmental attitude develop. Few things are as harmful as the Lord’s people becoming censorious toward the Lord’s under-shepherds. In fact, the Bible itself tells us that rebellion against our spiritual leaders is of no advantage to us (Heb. 13:17). I very much hope this series of brief meditations would be an advantage for both pastors and people.

May the Lord be pleased to use this volume to help us recognize the gifts he has already given to his body for our growth in Christ (Eph. 4:11–16).

Thabiti M. Anyabwile
Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands
October 12, 2010
DESIRES A NOBLE TASK

*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

1 TIMOTHY 3:1

In order to find reliable men to serve as elders, the first thing we need to look for is men who desire this “noble task.” We want men who have a heart for it, who “aspire to the office.”

This, in my experience, is not as straightforward as it sounds. Some men may “want the office,” but their wanting is really lust for power, and so they are not fit. Conversely, some men who are fit for the office think that wanting it shows pride, ungodly ambition, or impoliteness. Finally, some men are probably qualified, but they either lack the desire or think they are not qualified because they’re holding onto some idea of a “super elder.”

STIRRING ASPIRATION

Practically speaking, one of the first things a pastor must do is clarify and teach godly ambition, including the godliness of aspiring to be an elder. Faithful pastors will regularly encourage young men (including twenty-somethings) to include in their personal aspirations the goal of becoming an elder. After all, every characteristic that Paul lists for elders in 1 Timothy 3, except for the quality of being “able to teach” (v. 2), should mark every Christian man. The pastoral challenge to aspire to be an elder is good and godly. It’s another way of saying to Christian men, “This is what Christian
FINDING RELIABLE ELDERS

maturity and Christlikeness look like.” Such maturity and Christlikeness ought to be desired, not shied away from or downplayed.

Can you imagine the Christ-exalting power of a church filled with men possessing a strong, godly desire to lead Christ’s sheep in their homes and their church? In my experience, the problem in many churches falls at the other end of the spectrum—most men aspire for little more than comfort, anonymity, ease, and just about anything else except leadership responsibility.

Second, a pastor will likely have to clarify and teach the goodness of the leadership task. Paul calls leadership in the local church “noble.” And it is. But many men may have the impression that leadership is a burden, a headache, or a necessary evil. Others may think that religious leaders are all swindlers and fakes. For a couple of years, I resisted the internal call to ministry because I did not want to be associated with television preachers and unsavory pastors caught in scandal. I remained resistant until God made the goodness of the leadership task more evident to me. So it may be necessary for current elders, without painting a false picture of unending comfort, to develop, discuss, preach, and model joy in the ministry. After all, the Lord intends leading his church to be a joy for those men with the privilege (Heb. 13:17).

WHY THE OFFICE OF ELDER IS NOBLE

Part of the nobility of the task comes from the beauty and privilege of modeling Christ for his people. The elder sets an example in all things (1 Tim. 4:12). He embodies in significant degree what following Jesus looks like, possesses an observable degree of the Lord’s character, and provides a pattern for others to follow. The man not desiring to model Christ should be asked, “What exactly is more worthwhile than modeling Christ?”

The necessity of Christian leadership also makes the task noble. The Lord designed the church in such a way that it requires godly leaders. The sheep need shepherds. Without shepherds the sheep wander into all sorts of dangers and hurts, and the Savior grieves
Desires a Noble Task

over their aimless and vulnerable condition (Matt. 9:36). Sheep tending is a good thing.

So noble is spiritual shepherding that one pastor could write, “With all my discouragements and sinful despondency; in my better moments, I can think of no other work worth doing compared with this. Had I a thousand lives, I would willingly spend them in it: and had I as many sons, I should gladly devote them to it.”14

The task is noble and therefore to be desired. But practically, what are some things we can do or questions to ask in order to discern which men have this godly ambition?

TRAITS TO WATCH FOR

1) Take note of those men who regularly attend the church's services and the church's business meetings. If you have Sunday morning and evening services, they are at both. Start with those who already show an active commitment to the ministry and who model that commitment to the body. It's easier to put a man's existing desire and commitment to work than to stir up an apparent lack of desire. The pastor who rides the natural momentum of a prospective leader’s desire will find it a smoother ride in comparison to the bumpy or inert carriage of a man with no active desire—even if the man evidences all the other qualities in abundance.

2) Note the men who already appear to be shepherding members of the church even though they don't have the title “elder” or “pastor.” Specifically, who are the men that care for others by visiting or practicing hospitality, by giving counsel (often being sought after by others), and by participating in the teaching ministry of the church? You want to find the men who are eager to watch over their fellow brethren and are happy to do so without recognition. Those who naturally and quietly go about the work of loving God's people are ideal for this noble task.

3) Note those men who show respect and trust in the existing leadership, who work to understand the directions pursued by leadership, who ask good and appropriate questions in appro-
Finding Reliable Elders

appropriate settings, and who avoid creating confusion or dissension in public meetings. A man will not lead well until he first shows himself able to submit to leadership. Should a man become one of the shepherds in a congregation, he will soon find that he needs to submit as a leader, since leadership is not reducible to always directing others.

4) Be patient and note those men who evidence the desire over time. Watch a man. Encourage him. Observe the desire in fruitful seasons, in dry times, when he is full of joy, and when he is sorrowful. Does the desire persist, grow, and strengthen, or does it fade, wither, and weaken? If the desire is delayed, does he wander away to do other things? You want to find men who handle delays and disappointments with maturity and humility, not impatience and immaturity. And his desire for the office itself, even if delayed, should mature over time like a fine wine. As Paul says, we do well to “not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tim. 5:22).

Questions and Observations

When examining a man for the office of elder, ask him some of these questions in order to discern his desire for the office:

1) Have you ever thought of being an elder?
Start here. Many have never considered it and will be surprised that we ask. Others have considered it and may have put it out of their minds because of incorrect impressions, which we might be able to correct. For those who have not considered it, we need to be prepared to give them some reasons why they should, ranging from “this is one way of defining Christlike maturity for Christian men” to “I have seen these particular things in you that suggest to me this is something you should think about.” We do not want to pressure a man, but suggesting the idea of leadership may stir a desire that causes him to think differently about where to invest his life.
Desires a Noble Task

2) Have you considered that your lack of desire might be an indication of spiritual complacency or misdirection?
This question assumes that desiring the office is a good thing and that the qualifications for the office are a good self-assessment for Christian maturity. Pastorally, we want to press that vision into our men. And where there is an evident lack of desire, you can assume that pastoral care, teaching, and correction may be required.

3) Why do you desire to be an elder? To what extent are you aware of anything impure (pride, power, etc.) in your motives?
This is a question, obviously, for those who are considering elder-ship. Because we do not want to lay hands on any man hastily, we need to practically tease out godly ambition from impure motives. No one possesses perfect motivations. We all wrestle with indwelling sin. But due diligence requires us to help a man excavate his heart and to inspect what’s unearthed. Are we looking at a humble man desiring to serve, or an unsubmissive, proud seeker of control? What’s the source of his eagerness and desire—service or recognition? We should avoid calling men who may desire oversight “for shameful gain” or to be “domineering over those in their charge” (1 Pet. 5:2–3). The sheep benefit immensely when we discover such attitudes before a man is made an elder rather than after he has beaten the sheep. What’s more, confidence and assurance come to a man when he freely serves with pure motives (1 Thess. 2:3–6, 10).

4) Have you ever considered what would happen to the church, to the sheep, if they had no shepherd? Does your heart respond the same way as Jesus’s at the sight of shepherdless sheep (Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34)?
For those men who may recognize giftedness and some qualification in themselves, but who may shrink away from leadership, it may help to take the man’s eyes off himself and focus them on the people he would be called to serve. More is at stake than whether an individual feels comfortable with the idea of leadership, though that should be considered. At stake is the spiritual care of the sheep.
5) Have you considered what your avoiding leadership teaches the congregation about this noble task and the care of souls?

Sometimes gifted and qualified men may already be seen as shepherds in the eyes of the body, but for some reason they are avoiding formal recognition as an elder. In such cases, we should help them to realize that they are teaching the congregation about leadership even in their avoidance. They are teaching them that even the most spiritual and gifted men in the eyes of the body think leadership is a burdensome or unnecessary task. And in teaching this through their example, men unintentionally lower the congregation's standard and expectation for its leaders, and consequently lower the quality of spiritual care they and future generations may receive. The Bible commands the congregation to “remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). We do not want the Lord’s people to imitate low standards and work avoidance when it comes to so noble a task.

CONCLUSION

Choosing pastors is the most important decision a congregation makes, since the pastors will shape the congregation through their teaching and their model. Given this shaping influence, the Lord calls us to find men who “shepherd the flock of God . . . exercising oversight . . . willingly, as God would have [us] . . . eagerly . . . being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2–3). William Still, a faithful pastor who trained men for Christian service, observed, “My whole concern in my work of trying to make pastors (and I have ‘made’ too few, although I have had many men through my hands) is that they become men of God; then, the pastoral work will look after itself. It will still have to be done. But the man of God is made for that.”15

May the Lord give us discernment, patience, and clarity of observation as we seek reliable men who desire this noble task.

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DOES YOUR CONGREGATION ASK, “WHAT EXACTLY AM I SUPPOSED TO BE DOING AS A MEMBER OF THIS LOCAL CHURCH?”

HERE’S SOME HELP.

“In an era when Christians seem confused about what kind of community the church ought to be, here’s a helpful handbook outlining the church’s true biblical priorities, especially as they apply to individual church members.”

John MacArthur, President, Grace to You
EVERY CHURCH LEADER KNOWS the qualifications for elders and deacons that are spelled out in the Bible, but actually finding other leaders who fulfill the biblical qualifications can be difficult.

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“A good tonic to my soul and a mirror exposing the areas in which I need to shape up as a church pastor.”
CONRAD MBEWE, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia

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