

Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons

Thabiti M. Anyabwile,
Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012. 1
73 pages, \$8.98, paper.

Reviewed by: David Penno, PhD,
DMin Project Coach
Seventh-day Adventists Theological Seminary
Andrews University
Berrien Springs, MI.

Who should serve the church as elders and deacons? And what are the essential elements of their job descriptions? These are the two basic questions that Thabiti Anyabwile seeks to answer in his book *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*. The main focus of the book is on elders, with less than twenty-five pages devoted to the deacons. The book is based primarily on chapters three and four of 1 Timothy, where Paul discusses the qualifications and duties of the deacons and elders.

The author has served as an elder and assistant pastor at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and as an elder at the Church on the Rock in Raleigh, NC. He is currently the senior pastor at the First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands. So his experience as a local elder as well as a pastor would seem to give him some insight when discussing these offices.

Anyabwile's purpose is not to write a theology of spiritual leadership in the church; rather his goal is to offer a practical guide for selecting and training elders and deacons in the local church. His book would be the most useful to those tasked with selecting and/or training deacons and elders in the church, or those on a pastoral search

committee. So his theological perspectives are not presented as arguments, they are simply assumed. His focus is on how to apply in a practical way the counsel of Paul concerning leaders in the church.

I should mention here that some who read this work may be offended by the author's intentional use of non-inclusive language when discussing these two groups of church officers. Anyabwile never uses the words *woman* or *female* when referring to deacons and elders. They are always described as men. He also uses the words *elder* and *pastor* interchangeably, so one can assume that he would not support the idea of women as pastors of local churches either. No argument is presented in the book to substantiate this view; it is simply assumed throughout the book that all elders/pastors and deacons are men. So readers associated with churches that do have women in these offices will need to adapt and apply what is written to women who serve in these offices.

Also, in this book, the pastor is presented as one of the group of elders who lead the church spiritually, though the author does seem to accord the pastor a higher level of influence and accountability. So at times what is written seems to apply to both elders and pastors, but at other times, it seems that only the local pastor is the focus of discussion.

Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons is divided into three sections. The first section, which includes chapters one through six, is devoted to the deacons. The second section (chapters seven to eighteen) describes the qualifications for elders/pastors of local

congregations, while the last section (chapters nineteen to twenty-eight) describes the work and duties of the elders. Most of the chapters are very short, some containing as few as three or four pages. This structure of the book does make it very organized and simple to read. Each chapter begins with the verse of Scripture that is the basis of the discussion there. Most chapters also contain one or two series of questions that can be asked of candidates for these offices, or, in section three, of those already serving as elders.

Because there are twenty-eight chapters in this book, I will not attempt to review each chapter. Instead, I will describe the content of a few selected chapters.

In chapter thirteen, Anyabwile states that “teaching is the primary task of the elder.” He defines teaching as “the ability to communicate and apply the truth of Scripture with clarity, coherence, and fruitfulness” (p. 78). But this teaching ministry is not limited to public speaking or preaching. Personal conversations and facilitating small groups are also seen as teaching venues. Thus, not all elders may necessarily preach, but they must all be able to communicate the word of God clearly, in a way that helps members grow in their walk with Christ. The author also recommends that when a person is considered for the office of elder, that the spouse should be asked if the candidate can teach. A firm positive answer from this source can be a strong indicator of the ability to teach.

Chapter ten is based on 1 Timothy 3:2, where Paul requires that the elder be the husband of one wife. Again, Anyabwile does not argue here that elders must be men,

but the chapter title is “A One Woman Man,” and elders are referred to only as men and husbands. The author believes that Paul is not discussing polygamy, nor is he excluding single, widowed, or divorced men from service as an elder. Rather, Anyabwile believes that Paul’s focus is on moral and sexual purity. He cites John MacArthur and Phil Ryken in support of this interpretation. The way elders relate to those of the other gender is very important, as moral failure in this area can have devastating consequences on the members of the church.

Chapter sixteen deals with the elder as a leader in the home. How does the elder relate to the spouse and children? And how do they relate to the elder? If elders are not strong spiritual leaders in the home, if they do not manage their children in a way that causes them to follow the Lord, then how can they lead the church, which is much larger and more complex than the family? Do elders neglect the family, even to do church work? One of the questions that the author suggests in this chapter asks the children if they believe the candidate is qualified to serve the church as an elder. Since the family is aware of all the persons failures and shortcomings, the answer to this question can give a significant indication about the candidate’s ability to serve as a spiritual leader in the church. It is not stated, but one gets the sense that Anyabwile would disqualify anyone who had a child that was rebellious or that has turned away from God. Some may disagree with this idea, noting that Lucifer and Judas Iscariot rebelled under the leadership of God the Father and His Son, Jesus.

Chapter twenty-eight has to do with the elder and doctrinal fidelity. Throughout the book the author emphasizes the need for elders and deacons to be persons of prayer and of the word of God, able to teach and explain the truth of God to the members. He encourages elders to also read church history and historical theology, believing that the older works will keep them well-grounded in the faith. He also suggests that elders occasionally read bad books. Elders need to know what heresies are plaguing the church in order to be able to combat them. The role of protecting the flock from false teaching is very central to the elders' work.

Chapters four and fourteen discuss Paul's counsel that deacons and elders not be "addicted to much wine" or "drunkards." Some Christians interpret these verses to mean that church officers should not drink any alcohol. Anyabwile seems to leave the door open to the idea that they could drink in moderation; the issue is the abuse of alcohol that leads to a loss of control that can bring harm to other people and disgrace to Christ and his church.

One principle that surfaces several times in this book is the idea that the church should carefully observe candidates to serve as elders or deacons in the various aspects of life, including the ministry they currently are involved in. The author believes that many problems can be avoided by careful screening before placing persons into these offices. Wealth, standing in the community at-large, or longevity in the congregation should not be considered when screening candidates. The persons spiritual walk with

God, their effectiveness in ministry, and their accord with the various qualifications describe in this book are the criteria, according to the author.

There are many more ideas in this book, as each short chapter focuses on a specific qualification or responsibility of the leader. I have only covered a few of them. Everyone will not agree with all the ideas, but everyone should be able to glean some useful and helpful ideas about local spiritual leaders in the church. I think this book is worth reading, especially for those who select and/or train elders and deacons. Again the non-inclusive language has to be dealt with. But it seems the author's beliefs required him to write this way. So if one can adapt the material to an inclusive environment, then the ideas and principles are very helpful. The questions are very good too, even if they are not all used. Some of them are very powerful, and can create some very healthy dialogue.