

7 Characteristics of Wise Leaders

It is time to appoint a new leader: a new board member, or a chairman of a building committee, or a new pastor. How do we know when we are looking at someone who has wisdom? Based on the biblical criteria and common experience, we could ask these seven questions.

1. *Does this person show evidence of grace through a generosity of spirit, a love for mercy, an ability to forgive?* Wise spiritual leaders have a vision of God's great flow of grace to us and through us. They see that as one of the fundamental realities of life: that God creates, and re-creates, all out of his relentless love. Thus wisdom dictates that we go with that flow, and the decisions that we make in the church about programs and people and budgets must cooperate with that great divine work of grace. This is why James warns about people (and we may add, leaders) who are motivated by envy and selfish ambition. These are the attitudes and motives that are completely out of touch with God's grace-work. Sometimes ambitious people are appointed as leaders just because they are ambitious. They are willing to step in where others are not. In such cases, oftentimes, wisdom doesn't have a chance because the leader is looking more to get than to give.

2. *Does this person have a good reputation with others; is he or she the kind of person others seek out for advice and support?* People who are wise are a treasure to those around. They say things that stick for a long time because wise words go deep into the heart of any issue. They influence by planting seeds in people's minds and hearts which over the long haul show fruit. People with wisdom are trusted by others because it is clear that they are more interested in knowing God than impressing people. They realize how ridiculous self-interest is. Wise people are honest. There is integrity (which means "wholeness") in what they stand for.

3. *Does this person live a consistent life? Where there is wisdom, there is stability.* Please do not read "consistent" or "stable" as dull or mediocre. This is not about intensity or flair or the lack thereof. We need leaders who are consistent and stable in that their personal lives and their public lives are congruent. There needs to be an integrity or wholeness to who they are, what they think, and how they act. Wise people do not get sucked into the latest fad. They can get enthused about a novel idea, but they are patient enough to let time tell whether something has a shelf life of a year, a decade, or whether it is something that has enduring value. Wisdom prevents people from swinging from one intense commitment to another. Wise people do not leave one bridge after another half-built. They do not leave their followers as orphans.

4. *Does this person show a reasonable breadth of thought?* Wise people know what they believe, and they are intensely committed to it, but they also want to be able to understand divergent points of view, and they are open to adapting their thinking because they are wise enough to know they don't know everything. Wise people know what the non-negotiables are, versus the minor issues. In discussions about worship, evangelism, youth ministry, facilities, and almost anything else, wise leaders know the difference between issues of style and substance. But how do they know the difference? Again, it arises out of spiritual character. Wisdom dictates that we do not selfishly promote our preferences. It prevents us from feeling threatened by a new idea. Wisdom requires us to be open to many ideas, yet it frees us from feeling pushed and pulled by

the rush of the day. It is also our only hope that we will be life-long learners in the school of Christ. When we are wise we freely admit how often we succumb to foolishness.

5. *Does this person show a depth of thought?* Wise leaders look beneath the surface of the issues they face. They want their decisions to be based on principles, and this takes some mental and spiritual effort. Behind every program decision in a church there is a “why?” (there’s the principle), and behind every principle there is a “why?” (which is a matter of values). Our values are the why behind the why. And values can only be developed with the use of wisdom.

6. *Would other people describe this person as fair-minded?* Leaders have to be impartial. Their judgments about matters will engender trust only if people see that the judgments don’t waver from one situation to the next. Little children are quick to say “but that’s not fair!” because sensitivity to justice is core to our existence. We need it, we count on it. Churches are communities of people looking for models of fairness and justice.

7. *Has this person learned some lessons in life through hard times?* Much wisdom is borne out of pain. It strips us down to the bare essentials; it puts in perspective the things that really matter in life; it teaches us the things that belong to the soul. Pain humbles us and it forces us to find the true foundations for life. Remember the adage: “sadder, but wiser.” Ecclesiastes puts it this way: “Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure” (7:3-4). This is not a gloomy invitation for us to live a dour life. Rather, it means that when hard times come, it is best to face them honestly, go through grief with integrity, and come out wiser for it. In leadership, that wisdom will be like gold someday.

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