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The Voice of the Shepherd

The mark of a good shepherd is that the sheep know his voice. The following writers, Dub Orr, Jack Wright, John Royse, and Bob Jones, are all recognized as shepherds by those who listen to their wisdom born of experience. What follows are words of advice from voices that have been recognized.

Choosing New Elders: Perpetuating or Participating?

Dub Orr
Abilene, TX

According to sociologists, the level of trust in our society has steadily declined over recent decades to the point that our ability to trust others may be at an all-time low. This circumstance is especially true when authority figures, such as bosses or boards of directors, are involved. Individuals today seem to subscribe to the immortal words of that noted American philosopher, Lily Tomlin, when she opined, "We are all in this alone!"

As in our culture, so also it is in our congregations. Many in our churches do not fully trust their church leaders, just as in their occupations they do not believe that their corporate employer has their best interest at heart. The hypocrisies of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker have

also eroded the credibility of church leaders. There is much of a "me versus them" psychology at work.

This discomfort level is heightened in many congregations when new elders are selected. Although our congregations name new elders in a number of different ways, a common denominator is that the men already serving as elders are a de facto final screening committee for the elder-nominees, having the final say as to whether the nominees are finally installed as elders. This veto power can be viewed as a manipulative mechanism to insure that the style or philosophy or ideology of an eldership is to be continued, in effect making the particular eldership self-perpetuating. This disaffection particularly can occur in the forty-and-younger Christians who see themselves as having no control over the selection of their leaders. Their feeling of insignificance and insecurity may result in their "voting with their feet" and leaving the congregation.

It is very important in our insecure times that trust levels in our congregations grow. Elder selection methods are available which allow the congregation as a whole to select their leaders.

Biblically, this seems to have occurred in Chapter one of Acts, when the company of about 120 selected Justus and Matthias to be the short-list from which the apostolic successor to Judas was chosen. Similarly, in Acts six the "body of the disciples" in the Jerusalem church, not the apostles themselves, chose the seven men to minister to the widows.

Perhaps as many as ten congregations in Texas are successfully using a selection process which has been developed by the South 11th and Willis congregation in Abilene, Texas. When elders are selected, the congregation as a whole chooses their elders. Serving elders participate in the selection only as individual Christians. Checks and balances within the system protect it from becoming politicized. The congregation at South 11th and Willis has been blessed in using this process since first appointing elders in 1967. It has been utilized with good results at least six or seven times in the intervening years. A description of this procedure is available upon request.

The improved levels of trust generated by this open selection have been very impressive. Serving elders are empowered to lead more effectively. As a part of the naming of new elders, several congregations using the system have also reaffirmed their serving elders on the same terms as the new men being considered. Historically, at South 11th and Willis these serving elders have been reaffirmed with approval rates in excess of ninety percent.

Trust flourishes when accountability is practiced.

Pastoring in Conflict

Jack C. Wright
Austin, TX

Is there a place in the role of elders to deal with conflict resolution within the flock? The answer is a resounding "yes" when we look at general principles of leadership, or more significantly, at biblical examples or implications. The mature Christian as peacemaker would give a broad-brush basis for dealing with conflict. The more precise example of elder involvement in the Jerusalem conference would give another case of such a role function.

There is adequate justification for involvement in conflict resolution by elders both on the part

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of the total eldership and as an individual elder. Being a shepherd to the flock involves awareness of several different forms of conflict. Some of the more prevalent conflict situations are those which appear within families, including both husband-wife conflicts and those which arise from parent-child relationships. In any congregation we see great numbers of shepherding opportunities arising from conflicts within the family. Less prevalent, though still important, are situations that arise between families within the church, or between members of the body and various secular institutions. There are also those conflicts which involve individuals and groups within the body against the elders concerning policies, practices, and interpretations within the activities of the congregation.

What are some practical considerations for being effective in the role of "conflict resolver?" How does an elder aid in the resolution of conflict? There are some basic principles to be followed for effective conflict resolution.

First, the body must develop confidence in their elders. Confidence is crucial if members are to feel free to call their leaders for help early in the development of a dispute situation. This can only be done by the elders showing a constant willingness to be involved, a desire to be of help, and a display of capabilities that allow the body to know that they have the ability to be of help. These displayed traits allow a warm rapport to be built between the shepherds and the flock when combined with teaching or other ministry situations.

John 10:1-18, in which Jesus depicts the characteristics of the good shepherd, needs to be considered deeply as a basis from which the relationship of confidence can be established. When the elder(s) can say, "I know my sheep and my sheep

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This rapport allows an elder to be involved early in a dispute situation. When the elder is involved at an early stage in conflict resolution a solution may be found sooner and more easily given the fact that time has not allowed hardened positions born of resentment to form.

Second, some basic principles or techniques for dispute resolution must be learned. One must be seen as an impartial and objective gatherer of the facts of the dispute. This is best accomplished by actively listening to both sides in the dispute. The parties must be able to know that their “side” of the case is being heard by those attempting to arbitrate. Both listening to what is being said and attempting to discern whether other factors are involved than those being discussed are important. Many times the unsaid things are more important in finding a solution than those things that are verbalized.

Third, set some ground rules for hearing the various positions. In some cases the positions of the parties may be brought out with both sides present, but many times the feelings are so strong that the cases must be heard separately before the adversaries are ever brought together. Those hearing the cases must be perceptive enough to determine how to bring the parties together, when to bring them together or even if it is necessary to bring them together to find a satisfactory solution to the dispute. Complete satisfaction of all the parties is not always possible, but still a suitable solution may be found short of that.

Fourth, be patient, and allow your patience to be obvious to the disputants. Patience is sometimes measured by the time spent listening to some absurd, highly biased, and even wrong positions. We

would always like to resolve disputes quickly, but sometime we have to wait for prayers to be answered and hearts to be softened. Pressing for too quick a resolution may kill chances for ever coming to a settlement. Most disputes hinge on attitudes and these may be slow to change.

Fifth, it may be necessary to call in an “outside” party to act as arbitrator since all of the congregational parties may have taken positions causing them to lose their actual or perceived objectivity. This would be a last resort, but it has been known to work in some “church disputes.”

Finally, pray with all parties. Call for the intervention of the Lord as well as asking for wisdom and guidance. He will help if we will ask.

All elders should seek some education in the area of dispute resolution whether it be through an intense study of the Word seeking guidance there or

The Teaching Role of Elders

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An elder (overseer) must be —“able to teach” (1 Tim 3:3, NIV), and “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9, NIV). Paul admonished the Ephesian elders to “feed the church of God” (Acts 20:28, KJV). Peter, also writing to elders, admonishes “Feed the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2, KJV). Peter may well have been remembering Christ’s direct charge to “feed my lambs” and “feed my sheep” as recorded in John 21:15-18. All of these, along with other scriptures, make certain that an elder in the Lord’s church must not only be able to teach but he must exercise that ability. This is one qualification for an elder that is not given for a deacon. It is a sad situation if elders are seen as administrators instead of teachers. But just what is the elders teaching role in the church?

To begin with, an elder will teach by example. Peter’s continuing appeal to elders in 1 Pet. 5:3 directs them to “be examples to the flock.” An elder should set an example for the congregation to follow in friendliness, in hospitality, and in being a loving husband, father and perhaps grandfather. He should set a good example in such personal characteristics as patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 6:22-23). He should be a man that

the congregation can know and respect. He will be an example in service —showing his love for the Lord and His church in the time and effort he spends “tending the flock.”

It is not enough though just to teach by example. An elder must also be able to take an active and public role in the church's education program. When considering men to fill new assignments for service as an elder, a congregation would do well to consider the education, experience and interest such a man has qualifying him to teach. Many times a man is selected for an elder's work who lacks the ability or the interest for public teaching. The excuse is made for him that he is such a good man that he ought to be an elder and he fills the “apt to teach” requirement by his good example. However, this greatly restricts his ability to fill the teaching role of an elder. Too many times such a man fails to study current problems affecting the church. Decisions he makes often binds the church to traditional stands and does not leave freedom for ministering to members facing new or unique situations.

An elder must be able to exercise judgement and make teaching decisions which fit current problems of the day. To do this he must have a knowledge of the scriptures, an understanding of current conditions and be sensitive to the people involved. James is a good example of an elder doing this as recorded in the 15th chapter of Acts. Here James took the lead in forming a decision. It is interesting to note that before James spoke he listened well to the presentation of the circumstances. Could it be that being willing to listen will help an elder to fulfill his teaching role?

Besides having God's command to teach, what more does an elder need to have the “right” to teach? In order to have the “right” to teach he must be willing to spend time in study. In addition to searching the scriptures he will be challenged to read commentaries, books and other publications. He will listen to tapes and lectures. His study will keep his mind fresh and open, enabling him to properly apply the scriptures to current situations. He will be able to make scriptural applications that build up the congregation and do not drive weaker members away. He will be able to examine new ideas in light of the spirit of God's word rather than in light of traditional views.

What should be the goal for the teaching role of an elder? Eph. 4:12-15 (NIV) sets an ideal goal.

“To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of

God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

How Then Shall Shepherds Lead and Deacons Serve?

by Bob Jones
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Biblical silence on operational structures and techniques frees elders and deacons to adopt models which work effectively for other institutions in society. Therefore, in our country today church leadership involves meetings, agendas, division of work and responsibilities, programs, actions, plans, and assessments of effectiveness. These techniques, patterned largely after American business, may increase operational efficiency; but enhancement of efficiency must not define the operational roles of elder and deacon.

Scripture is explicit that a division of labor is desirable among all members (Romans 12: 6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28) and especially among those with gifts of leadership (Acts 6:2-7). Criteria by which elders and deacons are to differentiate work is implied most specifically in Scripture by the names given each office. Elders are to shepherd, oversee, and lead the flock by example and with love. (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3). Work which appears likely to have a major spiritual impact on the congregation or on any individual member would appropriately be defined as “elder business.” Deacons are to serve with wisdom

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Bob Jones

and diligence. Their service differs from that rendered by all Christians by devotion to work unique in scope or with potential implications on the spiritual life of the congregation (Acts 6:1-6).

Transforming principles underlying division of elder and deacon work into practice often proves challenging. This task is aided by an inventory of work commonly encountered and categorized as the work of leadership. Within each work-category characteristics may be specified to assist elders and deacons in recognizing components of work for which each office is responsible. Responsibility for specific tasks can then be claimed by individual leaders to distribute the work evenly and to best exploit the talents on individual leaders.

Division of leadership work only by church programs such as benevolence, education, evangelism and worship as is commonly done ignores the “people-work” which is the overriding concern of all leadership activities.

So much more important is “people-work” over “program-work” that three arbitrary categories might be suggested to include people, people maintenance, and programs. This tripartite division of the one continuous spectrum of the Lord’s work also facilitates differentiation of elder work from deacon work necessary for optimal coordination of leadership in the individual congregation.

People Work

Definition: “People-work” includes all energy directed at improving the spiritual, psychological, social and physical welfare of all individuals served by the congregation, including both members and

non-members.

Role of elders:

1. To challenge each individual served to grow in (or into) Christ by balanced interaction with the congregation.
2. To teach, nurture and lead by example all Christians and Christ-seekers. This work requires interactions with individuals, small groups and the entire congregation.
3. To provide fellowship, service, study and worship opportunities which feed the entire congregation on the Word of God.
4. To maintain unity by defining accepted congregational practice in controversial areas without absolute guidelines in Scripture.

Roles of deacons

1. To coordinate and facilitate the interaction of each member and truth seeker with activities of the church in a manner most likely to enhance growth in or into Christ.

People Maintenance Work

Definition: “People maintenance work” includes all energy expended by the congregation to meet legitimate needs of individual members. For the Christian the status-quo is desirable only in material and not spiritual matters. Therefore, categories of work which might be needed to maintain individual Christians could include provision of food, housing, medical care, transportation, or the meeting of other similar needs.

Role of elders

1. To recognize needs of individual Christians and assess the most appropriate method for the congregation to provide the needed support.
2. To monitor support given to individuals to assure that congregational action adds and does not detract from spiritual growth of the individual helped.
3. To prioritize when resources are inadequate to meet all legitimate needs (as is so often the case).

Role of deacons

1. To oversee the provision of support to individuals by the congregation in an equitable, loving manner.
2. To work toward solution of problems underlying material needs of individual members.

Program Work

Definition: Modes of organization used to implement God's work in an orderly fashion through the church.

Role of elders

1. To advise, coordinate, prioritize programs to maintain a balanced, spiritual emphasis and biblical direction.
2. To encourage spiritual growth of individual members by emphasizing the importance of involvement.
3. To insure all aspects of the Lord's work are optimally organized, thus maximizing spiritual growth and overall effectiveness.

Role of deacons

1. Plan, implement, and monitor effective-

ness of programs organized to meet the mission of the church.

2. Inform elders and congregation of program details to inspire and motivate congregation toward greater involvement.

3. Monitor work desires and involvement of individual members to offer each member work in at least one area of interest.

4. Inform elders of individual members unwilling or uncommitted to any aspect of the Lord's work.

5. Inform elders of problem areas of work with insolvable problems or chronic ineffectiveness.

6. Inform elders of planned or ongoing programs causing or likely to cause disagreements or dissension.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers, not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory which never fades away.

I Peter 5:2-5
