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1

Local Church Leadership

The Book of Exodus narrates the formation of God's ancient covenant people, Israel. God called a leader and prepared him to assume the oversight of Israel before He brought the nation out of Egypt. Moses proved to be a bold and competent leader.

As the people of God progressed in their wilderness journey toward the land of promise, Moses found himself confronted with an overwhelming leadership work load. The pressure of ministering daily from early morning till late in the day was draining his strength and frustrating the people. It apparently had not occurred to Moses that a larger leadership corps was needed so that he could delegate some responsibilities to others. When this situation was reaching a crisis level, Moses was honored by a visit from his father-in-law Jethro. Though Jethro was a humble shepherd from the back country he was a man of keen insight. After observing his son-in-law's strenuous work schedule for some days Jethro made a suggestion to Moses as to how he might free himself from the frustrations of overwork.

And Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good.

"You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.

"Now listen to me: I shall give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God,

"then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk, and the work they are to do.

"Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able

men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them, as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.

“And let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

“If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure; and all these people also will go to their place in peace.”

So Moses listened to his father-in-law, and did all that he had said.

And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.

And they judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge. (Ex. 18:17-26)

The wise counsel of that old layman probably saved the ministry of Moses. The principles of leadership pointed out by Jethro still need to be applied in the household of faith. The need for multiple leaders is as important in the New Testament church as it was in Israel. The pastor who never discovers the blessing of fellow-leaders will face frustration and failure throughout his ministry. Some Bible teachers believe that Moses forfeited much of his leadership authority and blessing when he listened to Jethro's advice. But the Bible does not say that. Not one word of rebuke or check came to Moses from the Lord. Moses was a stronger leader in subsequent days. He did not have to abdicate his leadership to form a system of supportive leaders to meet the growing needs of the people.

The pastor of a church needs the assistance and support of well-trained, godly elders and deacons. In the congregation of Israel, Jehovah not only selected leadership, but He also revealed structures of organization. He created offices. The Holy Spirit directed the early Christian leaders in a similar pattern by establishing offices and structures designed to promote the growth of the church.

The plea for an unstructured church life is based on misunderstanding of the divine plan for church government. The New Testament at no point advocates an unstructured church. It teaches that the worship and activity of the church is to be Spirit-structured. The structures of the spiritually alive church are vital. The quality of leadership determines to some extent the workableness of organizational structures. A new system will not replace Spirit-filled, committed leadership.

The necessity of leadership is a fundamental principle in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. God has always had leaders for His household. Israel had Abraham, Moses, and David. The church of the New Testament had Peter, James, John, and Paul. Every crisis in the history of the redemption community has been resolved by God-given leadership. God's method is a man commissioned to lead.

The health and growth of the church are closely related to its leadership. Right structures, workable organization, and competent leadership are part of the Spirit's order for Christ's church on earth.

Christ considered leadership so important that He devoted a major part of His ministry to training the twelve apostles. Christ knew they would have the leadership responsibility thrust upon them when He ascended to the Father.

God the Father appointed Jesus Christ as Head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22). As the Redeemer of the church and as Head of the church Christ provided for human leadership in the community of faith. Richard L. Dresselhaus says,

“Jesus did not leave His church without leadership. Arising out of the New Testament narrative is a structure that served the church well in the first century. Under properly appointed leaders, the church moved forward in unity and strength.”¹

In reality the church is dependent on competent leadership and sound organization. The New Testament makes that plain. To assume that a truly Spirit-directed church has no structure and no definable leadership is to be utterly deceived.

The realities of human society demonstrate that men from the

most primitive to the most complex societies must find and observe workable structures of organization if they are to survive. Modern sociology has learned much about the principles of leadership and structure in the total societal realm.

It is inherent in the church as a society of people that it should have both leadership and organizational structure. Because of the church's origin and spiritual dimension it should have distinct structures to achieve its purpose. The sociology of religion may give interesting insight into the church's leadership and government, but it is the Bible which provides the ultimate directive for the church.

The Character of Leadership

The attitude of leadership is important. Christ in His teachings and practice provides the ideal model for leadership at any level. Jesus' most frequent designation for His leader was that of servant. Christ revealed to His disciples a heavenly perception of leadership. This was difficult for the disciples to understand since they had an earthly view of leadership. On more than one occasion they discussed among themselves the possibilities of leadership in Christ's kingdom. Each time Christ rebuked them for assuming the viewpoint of the world in determining leaders.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus seeking the position on the right hand and the left hand of His throne in the Kingdom.

And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them.

"But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;

"And whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

At the Last Supper there was a dispute among the disciples about the privilege of leadership they would enjoy. With tenderness Jesus corrected their carnal viewpoint by pointing out His own example.

“For who is greater, the one who reclines at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:27)

On that very night Jesus had risen from the table, wrapped a towel around Himself, and washed the disciples' feet. No more moving explanation of Christ's view of leadership could be given than that scene (John 13:1-17). The eternal model of leadership for redeemed men on earth is the incarnate Servant of God, Jesus Christ.

The character of Christian leadership has been captured in the following words of Thomas M. Lindsay, a Scottish theologian of the last century:

*“Everywhere service and leadership go together. These two thoughts are continually associated with a third, that of gifts; for the qualifications which fit a man for service and therefore for rule within the Church of Christ are always looked upon as special gifts of the Spirit of God, or *charismata*. Thus we have three thoughts of qualifications, which is the ‘gift’ of God; the service to the Church of Christ which these gifts enable those who possess them to perform; and lastly the promise that such service is honoured by the Father, and is the basis for leadership or rule within the Church of Christ.”²*

The privilege of oversight in the family of God comes to those who serve their brethren gladly and selflessly. They demonstrate their divine appointment to rule by the exercise of those gifts given by the Holy Spirit. When leadership becomes isolated from the concept of ministry it is less than Biblical. The association of sanctification and service produces wholesome leaders. The abilities of the pastor, the lay elders and deacons should be the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The human understanding

of leadership is one of power and authority. Jesus denied neither of these prerogatives of leadership, in fact, He conferred both power and authority on the leaders He selected. But Christ was careful to explain to His disciples that a true leader is a servant. Inherent in the image of a servant is humility, submission, devotion, sacrifice, a concern for the welfare of those being served.

The Responsibility of Leadership

Leadership at any level which does not seek to find the gifts of the Spirit in the family of believers and cultivate the use of those gifts does not really understand its role. Christ has given every believer a gift for ministry to the whole body. The believer who has never learned to serve Christ and his brethren by exercising his gift is not yet mature. The preaching, teaching, shepherding, and oversight of official leadership should encourage every believer to be a functioning member of the body of Christ.

Not every Christian is a leader, but every Christian is to minister. The essence of Paul's statement to the Ephesian church is this great principle; the work of leadership is to equip all the brotherhood for ministry. To the extent this is achieved by any congregation it will grow.

. . . some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:11b-12)

Activating the potential for ministry in their present membership could revolutionize many churches. Spirit-endowed workers could fill the many ministry needs of the church. When a believer learns to exercise his gift the work assignment becomes a blessed ministry rather than a drag. The success of evangelism, Christian education, the maturation of believers, discipleship, outreach, stewardship, ministry to the community, and prayer all depend on an adequate work force in the church. In the average evangelical church about ten percent of the potential work force is activated. It staggers the mind to anticipate what would happen if even fifty percent of the work force in

a congregation would begin to function.

Leadership can either paralyze the work force or prepare it for action. Pastoral and lay leadership can be guilty of making spectators rather than a work force for ministry. Many churches suffer spiritual loss and go into decline because of the failure of their leadership to understand that they should be preparing every believer to minister. A kind of spiritual paternalism develops in some churches. This condition could be compared to a parent who performs a work assignment given a child rather than patiently insisting that the child do the task.

If the leadership carries out its responsibilities with an authoritarian mentality, the initiative of gifted believers in the church will be stifled. Authoritarian leadership feels threatened by the fresh, creative, and sometimes spontaneous ministries which emerge from the membership. A leadership with Biblical understanding welcomes the ministry of the whole body. It seeks to encourage and guide this wonderful life force toward the building up of the body. When pastor, elders, and deacons have this perception of leadership the whole assembly can know the joy of ministering for Christ.

A Basic Leadership Core

The key to activating the congregation to assume ministry is to have a basic core of leaders, composed of the pastor, the elders, and the deacons. They must be committed to teaching, training, and overseeing the believers in their work for Christ. Priority should be given to making the leadership core strong.

Inability to mobilize believers for their ministry is largely due to the failure of the core leadership to understand their function in the body.

Respect for Leadership

The New Testament speaks not only to the issue of the proper attitude on the part of leadership toward the congregation, but it speaks equally to the attitude of the assembly toward leadership. It is important to honor the office God has given to some of His servants. This is a spiritual issue. Lay leaders who find it

difficult to give honor to the pastor's position will no doubt find that the congregation will not honor their position as elders and deacons.

Too many contemporary Christians deal with their relationships with others in a purely humanistic manner. But it must be remembered that such thinking is built upon basic presuppositions that are more conformed to modern behavioral sciences than to the revealed Word of God. Respect for the authority of leadership has been challenged by many in modern culture.

God elects to elevate some as servants and requires the others to both respect and honor their position of leadership. Paul taught believers to observe this principle as members of society.

Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. (Rom. 13:7)

It hardly seems reasonable that if it is a Christian's duty to show respect in the ordinary social situation that such respect would not be observed in the life of the church. Paul spoke to this issue when he said,

*"But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,
"and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another." (1 Thess. 5:12-13)*

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes the Christian community to give regard to those over them in the Lord.

"Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." (Heb. 13:17)

This passage suggests that the attitude of a Christian to his

God-appointed leaders has far-reaching implications. A mutuality of regard is the law of relationship in the New Testament church.

¹ Richard L. Dresselhaus, *The Deacon and His Ministry*, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, Missouri, 1977, p. 9.

² Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, Minneapolis, reprint 1977 (originally published by George H. Doran Company, New York, about 1881), pp. 63, 64.