

Shared Leadership: Full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom

Luke's simple description of the emerging church at the start of chapter 6 is exactly how we would like our church to be described: "*the number of disciples was increasing.*" Church growth is a major issue in the Book of Acts. Following Peter's message on Pentecost, some three thousand people were baptized. Peter stressed repentance, conversion and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, "so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Luke describes the fellowship of believers. He emphasizes their devotion to the apostles teaching and to one another and their commitment to worship and prayer. He concludes, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (2:47).

Real Growth

In spite of opposition from the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, Peter continued to teach the people and proclaim in Jesus the resurrection from the dead, with the result that the church grew by several thousand (4:4). This explosive growth was attributed by Luke to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit and the courageous clarity of the gospel message: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (4:12). The sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, due to the judgment of God, sent shock waves through the whole church and all who heard about it. Luke offers this paradoxical description, "No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (5:13-14).

True growth takes place in the church when we can say the number of disciples is increasing. As we said earlier, the emerging church of Acts experienced explosive numerical growth, and it did so in four authenticating ways:

(1) Persecution rather than popularity tested their growth. Instead of striving to create a nonthreatening, low-threshold form of evangelism, the early church sought to sustain their courage and their testimony in an atmosphere of intimidation and persecution. Those who joined the church did so in the face of opposition.

(2) Preaching the resurrection of the Lord Jesus instead of promoting pragmatic self-help strategies tested their growth. The power of the preached word of God was experienced in the boldness of the truth rather than in the humor and psychology of a felt-need message. The early church was resolute in preaching nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" and then working to apply the message of the cross to every conceivable area of life (1 Cor 2:2).

(3) Sacrificial giving instead of fund raising tested their growth. Instead of raising revenue from the nameless masses, "God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them" (4:33-34).

(4) Great fear of God rather than mere human excitement tested their growth. They were far more concerned with pleasing God than pleasing man. Instead of being impressed with great numbers the early church was gripped with a sense of the seriousness of what God was doing in their midst.

Their depth equaled their breadth. Today's house church movement in China is measured by this test of greatness.

Wang Mingdao (1901-1991), known as the *Dean of the House Churches*, "strove not so much to create huge followings but to ensure that those who followed Christ offered a model for people to follow" (Harvey, 37). He stressed repentance, conversion, holiness, doctrine, and discipleship (Harvey, 24). In Wang's words:

"I have no desire to do something great. It is simply my hope, in this world where truth is beclouded and where the lusts of men have broken their banks, to be able to testify to God's truth and to live out His life. I wanted to be faithful unto death; in my own peculiar sphere I want to glorify God; and I want to spread the fragrance of Christ wherever I go. It is not so much a large church that I want to build; it is rather to build up a church according to the mind of God. Two needs stand out in the world today. One is for model believers; the other is for model churches. My prayer accordingly, is that we may be model believers, and that ours may be a model church" (*A Stone Made Smooth*, 140-141, quoted in Harvey, 43).

Judging from the Book of Acts, whenever we build a church "according to the mind of God" we will provoke a satanic counterattack. In Acts, Satan's offensive against the church comes on three fronts: physical persecution, moral corruption, and vocational distraction. Following Pentecost the authorities imprisoned and persecuted the apostles, but that only strengthened the disciples' resolve to proclaim the gospel with courage and conviction. The authorities were restrained from killing the apostles (5:17-42) and the number of disciples increased. If allowed to go unchecked, Ananias and Sapphira's deception would have planted the evil of hypocrisy and greed in the interior life of the church. However, Peter's Spirit-led confrontation strengthened the purity of the church, checked the spread of hypocrisy, and the number of disciples increased. Satan's "third and subtlest ploy was distraction" and division (Stott, 105). He sought to drive a wedge between the believers and distract the apostles from their calling, but the wisdom of God prevailed and the number of disciples increased. Instead of defeating the church through physical persecution, moral subversion and vocational distraction, the church experienced real growth. Real growth produces real problems, but these are the kind of problems that by God's grace deepen our faith in Christ and strengthen our outreach.

This is the first time the word *disciple* appears in the Book of Acts (see 6:2,7; 9:36; 11:26; 19:1-4). It underscores the true nature of a believer as a disciplined follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. A disciple is one who has heard the call of Jesus and joins him; one whose whole life is redirected in obedience to God and modeled after Jesus.

Real Problems

In a sense all problems are real, but the distinction I want to make here is between problems consistent with real growth and problems inherent with false growth. Not all problems and complaints are equal. Some demand our attention and some do not. When the church grows by adding committed disciples rather than religious consumers, problems can actually help to focus the church on its true priorities

and serve to demonstrate the gifts of the Spirit.

Real problems can bring us back to Jesus' mission statement: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:32). Real problems remind us of the true purpose of the church: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27; cf. Deut 14:29; 24:19; 26:12; Isa 1:17; Zech 7:10).

False growth solicits a wish-list of expectations that no true congregation of believers should have to meet. To try to satisfy the upscale religious consumer is very different from meeting the needs of orphans and widows. The expenditure of emotional energy, material resources and personal commitment to the meet the felt-needs of a self-focused target audience can divert resources away from global missions and social justice concerns. Besides that, when the church becomes one more consumer-oriented organization, existing to encourage individual fulfillment and a place to go for spiritual strokes, it contributes to the problem of self-obsession rather than solving it.

Problems that are consistent with the advance of the gospel challenge us "to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). The first practical church problem confronted by the emerging church challenged the power of the gospel to overcome cultural divisions and to compassionately meet the needs of widows. The specific complaint was this: the Hellenistic Jews, that is, Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture, argued against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (6:1). David Williams explains the situation:

"So, then, the Hellenists of this passage were Christians drawn from the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem (presumably by the preaching of bilingual Hebrews) and forming their own Greek-speaking Christian community. They were a minority within a predominately Hebrew church. The apostles themselves were, of course, Hebrews. And if anyone in particular was at fault over the neglect of the Hellenists' widows it was they, for they administered the common fund. It is hard to believe that this neglect was deliberate. More likely, they were simply unaware of the problem, largely because they had too much to do" (Acts, 103).

Every church that is growing is going to have these kinds of "good" problems that test our community, stretch our ministry, and challenge our priorities. There is no debate here as to whether the widows should be cared for. Meeting their physical and material needs was rooted in a good theology. Evangelism and spiritual edification go hand-in-hand with genuine social responsibility and need-meeting compassion. If we are going to be a congregation continually shaped by the Word of God and striving to be a family of faith where no one is a stranger and where all are welcome we are going to face challenges that require real leadership.

Real Leadership

How the emerging church responded to this problem offers a case study in biblical leadership that serves as a model for us today. In just a few sentences, Luke lays out five principles of effective leadership.

(1) Leadership addresses the real problems facing the Household of Faith in a direct and timely fashion. “No sooner was the complaint made by the Hellenists (and it was never denied) than the matter was taken in hand” (Williams, 103). Without denial or delay they dealt with the issue. Real needs were going unmet, widows were suffering, and the apostles responded immediately. A defensive attitude that sought to cloud the issue or cover up their failure to respond to the Hellenistic widows may have prevented them from acting, but they wasted no time assigning blame. Nor did they get bogged down in the decision-making process. Likewise, we have to be careful that a bureaucratic mentality does not set in that prevents the church from engaging and resolving issues, especially when people are suffering.

(2) Leadership is rooted in the biblical community and involves a dynamic interaction between those who take the lead and those who are led. “The Twelve,” that is, the twelve apostles, summoned the whole group of believers. This is the only time in Acts where the apostles are referred to by the title, the Twelve. It served to underscore the solidarity of this leadership body and the representative character of the apostles. They were a living parable of the new eschatological Israel. Whereas we tend to emphasize individuals and accentuate top-down leadership, the emerging church emphasized leadership solidarity. Leadership was and is everyone’s responsibility. By calling “all the disciples together,” the Twelve assured effective communication and a spirit of openness. They did not impose a solution on the church, but gathered all the disciples together (Stott, 121). There was no “back room deals” nor “behind-closed-doors” decision-making. By design, the admission that there was a problem and the proposed solution was out in the open for all to see and deal with.

(3) Leadership priorities need to be established and honored in the Household of Faith. The Twelve issued a statement to testify to their first priority. They affirmed, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables” (6:2). In other words, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor” (The Message). The phrase, “to wait on tables” was a figure of speech for financial transactions, “because money lenders sat at tables to do their business” (Williams, 106). Helping the poor was not an issue subject to debate, much less denial and neglect. All were agreed that this need must be met. The problem was time. The apostles did not have the time to manage the relief fund and give themselves to the preaching of God’s word and to leading prayer services.

The priority of preaching the word of God and prayer challenges many of the assumptions and expectations we impose on pastoral leadership today. It is commonly held that preaching and prayer are not enough for today’s pastor. Of course, no one comes out and says that preaching and prayer are not vitally important. What is said by famous pastors, such as Bill Hybels and Leith Anderson, and widely promoted in national pastors’ conferences, is that the gift of leadership is more important than preaching for inspiring “a high-impact, Acts 2, prevailing church” (Hybels, 26). Their point is well taken if by the gift of leadership they mean the ability “to come up with strategies and structures that provide opportunities for other people to use their gifts most effectively” (Hybels, 26). That is, after

all, what the apostles were doing in this situation. By making their priority preaching the word of God and prayer, they were delegating major responsibilities to other gifted believers and freeing themselves up to concentrate on what they were called to do. But what is often meant by the gift of leadership involves a concentration of power and responsibility in the hands of only a few top leaders. So today's pastor with the so-called gift of leadership becomes the modern CEO casting his unique vision for the church and hiring and firing to build his Kingdom dream team.

The apostles were governed by a principle that overruled what may have been perceived as a more pragmatic strategy and a more workable solution. "It would not be right . . ." was their starting point for establishing practical priorities. They led as they themselves were led. They were not making it up as they went along. They were submitting to the will of God. The practice of principled leadership in the emerging church of Acts is radically different from today's mega-church super-pastor, who sees himself as the Chief Resource Raiser and the motivational point man for get-it-done leadership. The popular profile of the modern day visionary pastor tends to bypass the lessons of shared leadership in Acts 6 and depreciate the Spirit-led power of the preached word of God and prayer to build a vital Household of Faith. If the apostles refused to be distracted from their primary calling, perhaps we should reconsider our expectations of pastoral leadership.

(4) Leadership selection is a vital responsibility of the Body of believers. The apostles delegated two important types of responsibility: first, to the community of believers, they delegated the selection of leaders, and then, to those selected, they delegated the designated task. Leadership was not a matter of top-down directives, but a highly interactive process that involved the body of believers. They chose from among themselves people who were "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." Their selection process depended upon the priesthood of all believers arriving at a consensus, based on prayer and spiritual discernment. The process was radically different from the will of the majority choosing the most popular candidate. Luke adds that "this proposal pleased the whole group." Everyone had sense of ownership in solving the problem and that helped to assure its success. They demonstrated mutual respect for one another. When the seven were chosen the body of believers "presented them to the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them." The process went full circle and concluded with a commissioning service.

(5) Leadership selection is based on a unique set of qualifications. They chose a team of seven who were qualified in a special way. They were "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." It may be easy to skip over this qualification, but consider its true significance. The seven were not picked because of what they might become but what they already were known to be. They were chosen not for their wished-for-potential but for their clearly demonstrated character. Nor were they chosen for their personality. Somebody wasn't saying that what we need for this position is an extroverted personality type who has an intuitive grasp of people's problems and is considerate of other people's needs. There wasn't a Myers-Briggs personality type that they were looking for. They were looking for people full of faith and the Holy Spirit. They were looking for people "willing to trust Christ, to take him at his word and to risk all for Christ's sake" (Williams, 104).

Ken Blanchard, coauthor of *The One-Minute Manager*, counsels pastors never to select a person for

their leadership team who doesn't have a positive emotional effect on you the minute he or she walks into your office. In other words, you can have the character of a man or woman of God, and the competence to meet the need, but if you don't pass the chemistry test, you don't belong. Thankfully, this was not how the early church selected its leaders. They looked for people full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

There may have been practical reasons for selecting seven men with Greek names, but I don't think it can be said that they were chosen for political reasons. Undoubtedly they needed Greek speaking disciples to minister to the needs of the Greek speaking believers. Selection was not based on potential, personality or politics, but on a consistent demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That was what commended these seven to all the disciples.

Every-Member Ministry

John Stott says that we do a great disservice to the church whenever we refer to the pastorate as 'the ministry.' When we use the definite article to designate the ministry, we imply that ordained pastoral ministry is the only ministry that there is. But Acts 6 proves otherwise and reaffirms the shared leadership and every-member ministry of the body of Christ. "All Christians without exception, being followers of him who came 'not to be served but to serve,' are themselves called to ministry, indeed to give their lives in ministry" (Stott, 122).

On the other hand, if pastors become distracted by administration and preoccupied by the wrong ministry, either because the pastor wants to control everything or because the people want to be passive and uninvolved, "the consequences are disastrous" (Stott, 123). The absence of solid biblical preaching inhibits seekers from coming to Christ and the congregation from growing into maturity in Christ. But when the preaching of the word of God and prayer is the main focus of the pastor, believers will discover their gifts, participate in the leadership, and people will be ministered to in Christ.

I am sure Luke could have concluded this description on shared leadership by saying, "So the Greek speaking widows were served and their needs were met." But he didn't. Instead, he said, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (6:7). Continuous growth took place because the emerging church faced persecution with courage, corruption with bold judgment, and distractions with a renewed focus on the priority of the word of God and every-member ministry. Luke ends this description where he began, by emphasizing real church growth.