



Leadership Principles Avoiding the Crack Up

by Chuck Gianotti

Some couples remain married with a growing joy in their relationship. Some couples fight, bicker and then divorce, believing their differences are irreconcilable. Still others try to push their tensions below the conversation horizon, and continue to live together—tolerably, but with little joy. Churches can act in similar ways. Like in a good marriage, believers must work to not only maintain the unity, but also grow in joy of fellowship with each other.

Sometimes tensions arise due to doctrinal aberrations—which can be handled either in a godly way or in a fleshly way under the guise of doctrinal fidelity. But, like a marriage, the fellowship of the local church can also be strained by “lesser” things. I know of a church that is quite proud of their doctrinal purity, but lives with simmering conflicts that occasionally rise in the strangest ways. For example, the church was almost destroyed when, during a building renovation project, one faction wanted to use stain on the new woodwork, while another wanted to use paint! How can a healthy church avoid becoming like an old worn-out marriage—or worse, from becoming another church “divorce” statistic?

THE FOUNDATION OF UNITY

God desires truth. Without this, nothing else much matters. “Your word is truth” John 17:17 (NIV). The first piece of the spiritual armor is the “belt of truth” (Eph 6:14). Paul in his farewell message to the Ephesian elders charged them to “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Ac 20:28 NASB). The importance of vigilance in right doctrine cannot be overstated. It is rooted not in an abstract concept that God is pleased with us being right. Rather, the ultimate importance lies in God’s estimation of His people—they are precious to Him. It is people, not concepts, that interest God.

Therefore, we must get our teaching right! “For God so loved the world ...” The greatest of the commandments is “You shall love ...”, “A new command I give you that you love one another ...”, “The end of this command is love ...” Paul began his great church leaders’ manual to Timothy with this: “The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Ti 1:5). Unity in love, based on the truth of God’s communication to us—that’s foundational.

However, having and preaching the truth in principle does not guarantee unity in practice. It is a curious thing that so many churches who assert right doctrine waste precious time and energy with lesser, internal squabbles. God wants unity even in the context of right doctrine!

DEAR TO GOD’S HEART.

“... I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in you. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.” (Jn 17:20-21). Jesus did not pray that unbelievers would be unified through faith into the body of Christ (true as that may be His desire). In this passage, He prayed for future believers, that they would be unified. The Lord knew that we would have a propensity toward divisiveness for He felt it important to include this request in His high priestly prayer, just before His crucifixion. Paul and Barnabas experienced the truth of this first hand (Acts 15:36-41). Later, possibly drawing on his own personal experience, Paul admonished two conflicting women (he calls them *fellow servants*) to “agree in the Lord” (Phil 4:2). This propensity toward conflict knows no gender limitations. Clearly, sometimes godly people disagree and have difficulty working together.

How can unity be preserved in the local church? Assuming that doctrinal truth is not in question, here are some practical considerations:

ENCOURAGE HUMILITY & DEFERENCE

If Christ-likeness and genuine fellowship mean anything, then there are some practical implications. Scripture tells us to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own

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interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). If your elders group is experiencing tension, why not read this verse together at the beginning of every elders meeting? Ask yourself, “Do I need to check my own ego—do I portray the humble attitude of the Lord whom I profess to emulate?” He “... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil 2:7). He who washed the disciples feet was not speaking esoterically and mystically when He said to do likewise. He was being very practical. Our Lord actually and literally washed their feet! Practical humility means a real demonstration of serving one another. Jesus knew the frailty of the human ego, so He pulled out the stops in demonstrating what He means in the upper room on His knees. It is the hardest thing to do when we want to get our own way. But, godly elders will do like their Lord.

ENCOURAGE UNITY AMONG LEADERSHIP

It is so much easier to talk about this than to do it. It is much more convenient to “serve” people by preaching at them or correcting them. And it is hard to serve those with whom we have a sharp disagreement. Many suffer from grandiose visions of being a modern day Ezekiel or John the Baptist.

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Biblical Foundations

Teaching in the Church

by Jack Spender

Of all the duties of elders, none is more important than the feeding of the flock, that is, the ongoing instruction of believers from the Scriptures. Both Paul and Peter give strong exhortations specifically to elders concerning this great responsibility. A quick look at several New Testament passages will show why this work is so vital to the spiritual health of any church.

In Luke 24:32 (KJV) we read that the heart of the disciples burned within them as the Lord explained the Scriptures. In John 17:17, the Lord Jesus prayed that His disciples would be sanctified through the truth which is the Word of God. In the early chapters of Acts, we see a direct correspondence between the increase of the influence of the Word, and the growth of the church. In Romans 10:17 we learn that faith comes through the Word of God. Peter writes that young Christians need the milk of the Word in order to grow (I Peter 2:3). These examples could be multiplied. In the Old Testament, many passages in the Psalms and Proverbs extol the value of God's Word for warning and comforting His people.

Teaching in the Church

There are many different ways to present God's Word in the life of the church; in counseling, in small groups, one on one, etc. Probably the single most important time is through the teaching service in the gathered assembly. Teaching and preaching of the Scriptures with the power and authority of the Holy Spirit builds the believers up spiritually, refutes doctrinal error, and enables the church to grow in health and vigor as well as in size. We know from Acts 2:42 that this was a priority of the earliest Christians, something in which they continued steadfastly. Therefore, assembly elders are responsible to protect this time from all that would intrude and weaken it. Let's first consider a few dangers, and then explore some of the characteristics of ministry that edifies.

Be Vigilant

The teaching service of the church is a time to hear God speak, both to the individual and to the whole church. It is not a "share time" for private viewpoints. Under ordinary circumstances, it should not be a time for young speakers to practice; there are many opportunities in the life of the church for this. Incidentally, when we refer to Acts 2:42, we often abbreviate the list to "teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers," but the first item is literally "apostles doctrine." We must never forget the historical connection between Christ's original apostles who were inspired to write God's Word, and our own Bibles from which we receive spiritual instruction and nourishment that is both encouraging and convicting because it is au-

thoritative (II Tim. 3:16-17).

Moreover, the teaching hour is not a time for entertainment, jokes, humorous stories of the preacher's experiences or travels although occasional illustrations can be helpful. God's servants are not entertainers. Nor is the ministry addressed to a "mixed multitude." The instruction is to "feed the flock of God." Some groups today are neglecting the Lord's command to go into the world and preach the gospel, and are trying instead to induce the world to come into the church by using all sorts of attractive gimmicks to accomplish this. Ministry is often shallow since the unchurched "might not understand or enjoy it." But study the opening words of every epistle, and you will discover that the apostles never addressed the church as a mixed company. Certainly unsaved people may be present in our meetings, but they are "listening in" on the most crucial function of God's spiritual family.

Over time, the presentation of the Word should expose God's people to the "whole counsel of God." Consecutive, systematic, expository ministry is most helpful to accomplish this. Believers should have a basic understanding of the longer books in the Bible as well as the shorter ones; of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Topical studies and subjects taken from their larger context are popular, but there is nothing like the careful, patient exposition of an entire book of Scripture – verse by verse – to build up the church. Is there time during the week to discuss the message given on Sunday? There should be! Small groups meeting in homes can be very helpful here.

Bible teachers have different styles, and there is room for a wide variety of approaches to communication that edifies, but we must never forget that the power to change lives comes through the Spirit and the Word, not the dramatic efforts or emotional displays of the speaker!

Another important matter that is often overlooked is the fact that many people today have a short attention span. Consider using the first 30 or 40 minutes of the "Bible hour" to provide the best concentration. Announcements, prayer, special music, congregational singing, etc. have a place, but we are wise to ensure that adequate time is given to the preaching of the Word.

Elders should be more concerned to have men in the pulpit who bring a clear and relevant message from the Lord, than simply lining up speakers who have available dates on their calendars. Preparing nourishing food for the flock is hard work! Paul writes about the honor that should be given to those who "labor in the word and doctrine" (I Tim. 5:17).

But what profit will there be in all this

care if people are not present to hear the Word, or are regularly distracted by other "good things." Elders can do much to encourage faithful attendance. Are some leaving after the Lord's Supper? Are some absent because they are encumbered with serving responsibilities? In some assemblies, all of the high school age young adults, along with those who teach them, are regularly absent from the teaching hour.

The Bottom Line

In all of the above, we must never forget that we have a great adversary who is utterly and eternally opposed to the Word of God! If he cannot use evil things to weaken the effectiveness of the teaching time in the church, he will use good things. No task faced by elders is more crucial than protecting the quality of the feeding time for God's flock. But the reward for this ceaseless vigilance will be spiritual vigor in this life, and the crown of unfading glory in the next (I Peter 5:4).

In the next issue, we'll think about some of the characteristics of ministry that edifies.



Signs and Wonders?

The Signs and Wonders Movement has been sweeping the Christian world. Called by various names, there is nothing new under the sun and this movement entails an updated version of the Charismatic Movement of the 60's and 70's, but with bizarre extremes.

For a critique of this movement by two individuals who have had direct involvement from the inside, check out "*Spiritual Reality or Subtle Deception?*" by Chuck Gianotti and Shannon Gianotti. This father and daughter team have "been there and done that." Their experiences, separated by almost 30 years, have much in common. Chuck came to Christ through the charismatic influence in 1972 and Shannon for a time became involved in the S&W movement at a major Christian college.

Together they expose the subtle ways in which Christians can be led astray by false teachings. God certainly works in mysterious and sometimes miraculous ways. But there are dangers in seeking signs and wonders, and this movement can leave many shipwrecked in their faith.

You can read this book online at www.bible-equip.com. Or you can order a copy by contacting us at ESN (see back page for contact info.) Also, online are booklets dealing with the subject of Tongues and Miracles.



Avoiding the Crack Up *(cont. from page 1)*

What would happen if your elder meetings were characterized by men who genuinely loved and served each other? To give examples would seem trivial, because words cannot capture the attitude that transforms a deed or action, no matter how small, into a service befitting the Master's honor. Jesus said it best, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (Jn 13:15).

Unity among the elders is absolutely essential to the unity in the church. The better the personal relationships, the less likely the misunderstandings. The other day after dinner, I had wanted to go to my workshop to work on a project, but I needed a tool. So I announced to my wife, "I should go to the store, but it will be too late to go down to my workshop when I get back." My wife, who encourages me to work at my hobby, responded, "I'd really like to see you get working on that project." I said, "You're right." As I put on my coat and shoes, she asked, "Where are you going?" "To the store of course?" "But, I thought we agreed you would go to your workshop." We spent about 5 minutes trying to figure out how we had miscommunicated. The point is that if my wife and I had a strained relationship, she could have accused me of saying one thing and doing another. I could have accused her of not listening to me. In reality, I had never mentioned to her my need of the tool to finish the project. Our trust is built by the give and take, the sacrifice and service for each other. We knew our after dinner conversation was simply a misunderstanding, not a symptom of selfishness.

How can elders build their relationship of trust? One group regularly goes out to dinner together with their wives. Some elders meet regularly on a one-on-one basis for mutual encouragement and fellowship. A perceptive elder group will encourage the less verbal elder to speak up. Helping each other out in the mundane issues of life can build up the group. Building strong relationships at this level is paramount. To be sure, this doesn't mean we all have the same likes and perspective, or that we will always agree—but we want to encourage "... being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose..." (Phil 2:2). When elders trust one another, they can celebrate the diversity of perspectives they bring to the table. Resolution of conflicts becomes easier. Therefore, we must foster and guard our relationships with each other on a personal level. To do otherwise will affect the entire church like a cancer.

ENCOURAGE UNITY WITH THE BODY

Unity requires communication and care. There is no better way than to go into people's homes. Most people will know you care if you take the time to listen to them and understand them. This doesn't mean you bow to everyone's wishes, no one expects that. But people

will follow the lead of elders if they feel cared for and listened to. Two questions are helpful to ask: "How can the elders pray for you?" and "Is there anything you feel the elders should know?" Then listen with the goal of really understanding. Ask questions, don't get defensive, don't justify—simply try to understand. This may lead to prayer, instruction from the word or practical help. Regardless, they will feel more a significant part of the body because they are being cared for. When elder decisions are made or difficult teaching needs to be given, the congregation is more likely to sense that the elders are acting with caring hearts. Their humility and servants' hearts will be evident to all. This takes time, but it is well worth the investment.

QUICK LIST FOR PRESERVING UNITY

Pray for unity. In so doing you will be imitating the Lord in the upper room.

Remember who you are: brothers and sisters in Christ. No one is superior to anyone else, whether elder, preacher, custodian or bulletin folder. To the carnal Corinthians, Paul appealed to the foundational truth that bound them together, the core of his preaching: "Christ, and Him crucified." We are blood bought brothers and sisters in Him (1 Cor 2:2).

Distinguish truth from application.

We must insist on the former, but be flexible with the latter. For example, practice of the Lord's Supper is mandated in God's Word, but the time of day and length is not. There may be strong considerations for such logistics, but these ought not lead to divisiveness.

Develop good communication. Decisions made after hours of discussion in elders meetings cannot be communicated well in a two-line bulletin announcement. Use your best communicator to be the spokesperson. Do it often and do it well.

Identify the real source of tensions.

Discernment will save much wasted time and energy in understanding what the real source of conflict is. Better to solve the right problem than follow the symptoms to the wrong source. Otherwise, the problem will crop up with a different symptom. In one church, an elder became abrasive and unresponsive to commitments he had made. Confrontation was to no avail. However, God began to work in him, and in the context of a trusting relationship he came to apologize for his behavior. The symptoms turned out to be the result not of a selfish heart, but of much pressure in his secular employment and extended family life. The humbleness that was evident resulted in a stronger, more unified elders' group.

Disempower the scapegoats. It is easy to blame others, our evil society or the idea that we are in the "last times" for difficulties God wants us to deal with in a humble, bibli-

cal way. Sometimes it is simply our own self-centered ego that is the problem. The sooner we recognize this, the sooner we will move toward unity of heart.

Keep confidence. Love covers a multitude of sins. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pe 4:8). I remember being at an assembly dinner and as it happened I was sitting near a brother with whom I had some disagreement. During the meal, I noticed him quietly getting my attention. Discreetly, he indicated with a simple hand motion that I had something hanging from my nose. Embarrassed, I quickly retrieved my napkin and corrected the situation, without anyone else noticing. My "adversary" could have made a public scene of the matter, or left me to my embarrassment. He never said a word about it to me afterwards. I was impressed that my demonstrated true love by helping "cover up" my social indiscretion. How much more would could we help the unity of believers to "cover over a multitude of sins" of the relationship kind.


Pick your battles wisely. Don't waste time and "relational energy" on small stuff. One brother does not like the Lord's Supper setting where the chairs are in a circle, finding it awkward. An older couple prefers an evening meeting at 7:00pm because of their supper time habits, a young couple prefers it at 6 pm because of their young children's sleep requirements. Certainly, deference is a small sacrifice in this case.

Leave the posse behind. In other words, first go to a person with whom you are having tension, one-on-one—don't gang up on him or her. Deal with conflicts in a biblical manner (Matt 18:15).

Don't take public swipes. If you are privileged to preach God's Word from the pulpit or comment during a small group time, don't use this as your opportunity to proclaim your side of the conflict. Avoid innuendos altogether. Elders should guard the public teaching from personal vendettas or self-serving presentations.

Admit when you are wrong. Cut your losses. To do anything else will damage your credibility and your effectiveness in resolving any difficulty.

Treat others with respect. Even when they are wrong, or you think they are wrong. Don't be degrading or condescending regardless of gender, race, social status or educational background.

God desires unity in both doctrine and in heart. As leaders, we must insist on truth *and* love! "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you" (1 Ti 6:20-21). 

Wives' Corner

Practical Hospitality

by Ruth Spender

I don't know about you, but I do not make New Year's resolutions anymore. There is however, something about a brand new year that seems to call for a fresh start, a time to reassess our goals and make needed changes in our lives. Some of these goals may be temporal while others are spiritual in nature. Some are on a personal plane while others are on a corporate level.

In our assembly, the elders lay out several goals each year that they believe the Lord would have us work on as a fellowship. One goal we have been working on this past year is becoming an assembly marked by biblical hospitality. Because we have much more to learn, we will continue to make it a priority for 2005.

One aspect of our family's ministry which I enjoy is the opportunity we have to visit other assemblies when my husband is asked to share his teaching gift. Actually, it is a time when we learn from one another and our lives are enriched even as we seek to serve. Being a visitor helps us see things through the eyes of a visitor and we have learned much about hospitality as we have traveled around. This has helped in formulating our approach to serving those who visit our home assembly.

When working with young believers, we often emphasize the need for Christians to be willing to open their homes to God's people, but do we remind them that the local assembly is also a family that should be known for its hospitality? Every believer in fellowship should be involved, and the women play a crucial role in this.

In brain storming we have come up with some practical ways to make others feel welcomed when they visit our fellowship. First,

everyone is encouraged to get involved in greeting those who are not regulars, rather than leaving that job to the elders or some official greeter. Visitors should not be left to wander or guess where they are going once they enter the building. Of course, not everyone will rush up to them at once, but it is better to have two or three people introduce themselves initially then no one at all.

Next we need to consider our visitors' needs; if they have coats or accessories to store, take them to the coat room and be sure there are plenty of hangers or hooks available for them to use. They need to

No one with an overwhelming need should leave without our sharing practically with them.

know where the restrooms are located. Hopefully, those are clean and welcoming. When visitors have small children, take them to the nursery and introduce them to those in charge of the little ones. Check to see if any older age children would like to attend Sunday school. We like to let parents know that they are free to bring their children with them into any service they choose.

During "coffee" time, it's good to see that visitors are served first just as you would serve guests first in your own home. We have one dear sister who often brings refreshments to those who are "stuck" in conversation. What a lovely ministry.


Extending hospitality may include an invitation to dinner. In our assembly, the elders have developed a creative plan to meet this need since we have a good number of visitors on Sunday mornings. The believers are encouraged to extend hospital-

ity, but if they are unable to take guests home or, as in the case of students or young families, unable to afford the expense, they may take visitors out to eat and submit a receipt to the assembly for reimbursement. This plan has been in action for a couple of years, and it is working out very well. A ministry coordinator makes sure that no guest falls through the cracks.

Another assembly we went to designated spaces for visitor parking near the chapel entrance. Now that makes a newcomer feel welcomed before they even come through the door!

It is our goal to never have anyone with an overwhelming need leave one of our meetings without our sharing practically with

them. A needy family fund is available if someone is in need of food, heating oil, or medical assistance. We are to distribute to the necessity of saints and be given to hospitality.

In conclusion, we should always treat visitors who come into the assembly just as we would treat those coming into our home. We wouldn't think of letting them use a dirty unkempt bathroom or allowing their children to play with broken, worn out toys. Those same principles should guide us in the way we do things in the house of God. In every aspect of assembly life where we seek to do our best for the Lord Jesus, we should help others see His excellency on display as we strive to glorify Him in all our ministries. Guests will leave refreshed in body, soul and spirit, and we will have the blessing of knowing that what took place was done just as if it had been the Lord Himself who came into our meeting. As the Scripture tells us, some have entertained angels unaware (Hebrews 13:1-2 KJV). 

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