



Biblical Principles Change and Truth

by Chuck Gianotti

Studies in 1 Timothy—part 8

“But, if we just change the structure of our meetings, things will go so much better!” “But, it’s not about structure, it’s about God’s presence in our ministry!” Sound familiar? Two divergent views, reacting to each other. Common among elder-led churches are differences of what some might call “philosophy of ministry.” There are those who champion practical leading and teaching and there are those who champion doctrinal truth and the spiritual nature of the ministry; those who favor creative ministry and those who promote straight “lecture-style” proclamation. If we force the pendulum to swing to one extreme or the other, our leadership team becomes unbalanced like a man with one leg shorter than the other. It doesn’t matter which leg is shorter, the result is the same: ineffectiveness!

Paul was well aware of this tendency, which is probably why he included 1 Timothy 3:14-16 in the middle of his practical leadership letter to young Timothy. Paul’s focus is clearly on how leaders in particular should conduct themselves. “...I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God ...” (3:15 NASB). Some translations use the word “behave.” In other words, the practical outworking of our faith is in view. Also, translations differ in whether Paul is instructing Timothy on how *he* should conduct himself or whether this is teaching for *all* Christians. However, it is clear that Timothy is to teach these things to others (2 Tim 2:2).

Make no mistake, Paul’s practical teaching is rooted in rock-solid spiritual truths. For him it was not *either* practical *or* spiritual, but *both* practical *and* spiritual. “... *the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory*” (1 Tim 3:15b-16).

The Practical

Notice how the practical is related to the core truth that the local church is essentially a household. That this is *not* just a minor description of the local church is seen in the poignant qualification of elders that they manage their own households well. For how can they shepherd the household of God if they haven’t proven competent in doing the same with their own household (1 Tim 3:4-5, see also 1 Peter 4:17, 1 Cor 3:16). I sense Paul is saying that this is critical to the well-functioning of the assembly.

The Biblical model is not that of a corporation with a CEO, board of directors and stock holders. One nationally known mega-church leader asserts that we need to jettison the “shepherd” imagery of church leadership as a rural, antiquated metaphor, and use the example of the CEO (chief executive officer) model of business. His rationale is that such a move would be highly relevant to today’s culture. But this ignores the fact that God is vitally interested in both the

imagery and the practice of “church life.” We are the church of the living God, not the church of 21st century culture—and God does not change!

A CEO’s family life has little bearing on his ability to lead a corporation. But an elder’s family life is essential to church leadership—precisely because the local church is more like a family household than a business. When evaluating potential changes in ministries or leadership structures, one key evaluative question to ask is, “Does this proposed change help the church be more like a family, or more like a business?” Or “Are we going about this like a family or like a business.” Certainly, there are some common sense business-like activities that can help any group of people function well. Families do need some structure and divisions of responsibilities; businesses need a lot! But, how changes are implemented and their result affect the family nature of the local church. Wisdom and spiritual insight are necessary at this juncture—things are not always black and white.

Local churches can err in many ways: they can be over-structured or under-structured; led by committee or led by the loudest voice; either nothing gets done or else too much gets done; nothing changes or there is too much change; too much innovation or too much tradition. Even in elder-led churches, the family atmosphere is lost when the elder team acts more like the ruling Sanhedrin than family leaders.

An Example

What does a family atmosphere look like? I remember as a child, my father was offered a job transfer. Since it involved the whole family, he wanted input from all of us, including the children. Because of discussions we had, we came to trust my father’s understanding of all that would have been involved. He appealed to us on the basis of what changes would happen to our individual lives. The move would involve relocating from the wonderful Blue Ridge foothills of western Virginia to the cement jungle of Washington, D.C. After much interaction, all the family was against the move, and so my father turned down the transfer.

A few years later, Dad had another transfer opportunity, this time to the sun-drenched, trade-wind island of Oahu (Hawaii), with rolling surf, warm weather and lots of sunshine. Again, he consulted the family for our input. The feedback was unanimous: “When do we go!”

My father was concerned about how his decisions would affect the family. He made each of us feel we were a real part of the decision. He didn’t presume to “know” what we were thinking, even when he was pretty sure what our answers would be! And, as you can guess, he was skilled to know how to influence our thinking by how he presented things to us. He certainly was within his right to make the decision by himself, as the head of the family, but he choose the path of influence rather than dictate to bring it about. The result was that we were unified as a family and we moved through the huge change in our lives with relative ease, during the important teen years of my life.

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Leadership Principles

The Leading Brother

by Jack Spender

Have you ever heard an influential man in the church referred to as a “leading brother?” Usually used to describe someone in leadership, the expression arose in years gone by for a number of reasons. Some assemblies did not accept the idea of a recognized group of elders, so those who led the assembly were described informally by such terms for their greater influence among the flock. In other places, the elders were a known group, but a particular brother stood out due to outstanding gifts or leadership qualities, and could be identified as the “spark plug” of the team.

In still other cases, one man came to hold such a place of prominence, that his involvement and ultimately his will eclipsed the gift and participation of his brethren. As time passed, he became a sort of bishop presiding over the elders. It is this latter situation that we want to consider in this article.

Perhaps a practical question will help. What do you do when one elder becomes *de facto* the head elder, and virtually runs the assembly? The actual cause might range from an over active ego, to the natural result over time of letting the “eager beaver” do it all. The question is important because no matter what the cause, the result is nearly always a bad one. Before thinking about how this problem might be resolved, it will be helpful to understand some of the conditions that helped produce it.

Teamwork Neglected

Good leadership is important to the church. To be healthy, a local church needs an active and functioning leadership team to feed and protect the flock. The Biblical model seen throughout the NT is not a lone individual in charge, but a team of men working together, sharing the load. In spite of the differences these men will have in energy, availability, personality, natural talent and spiritual gift, the integrity of the team will depend on its own ability to maintain a sort of equilibrium in the application of authority. If this balance becomes lopsided, problems can follow.

In many cases, substantial time is devoted to making and implementing church decisions, leaving little time for attention to unity, harmony and relationship building. Thus the assembly can become vulnerable to faulty decisions since the safety provided by the multitude of counselors (Prov. 11:14 KJV) has been undermined—not so much by neglect in the decision making process, but by a breakdown of team relationships that protect the objective participation of every brother.

What to do?

In ideal situations, problems stemming from lack of balance can be dealt with and corrected from within the leadership itself. Certainly, elders have the authority to deal with their own problems. Each brother must view his role in the church as a trust from God. Frank and honest discussion, and respect for the Biblical injunction to prefer one another in honor will go a long way in maintaining a healthy balance of responsibility within the leadership. But what about situations where one man has dominated for years, and no ones seems able (or willing) to address the problem?

First some diagnostic questions: Is the situation seen for what it really is - a problem? Have those who are aware of it brought it to the Lord in prayer? If neglect of duty or lack of exercise by the men of the church

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contributed to the one brother taking on more than his share, has this been admitted and repented of? Has appeal been made to the zealous brother, not with a critical spirit, but with an attitude of appreciation for all the work he has done? Is there a real desire to see the brother restored to a fitting place as one among equals, or is every thought now devoted to removing him? Only when such questions have been honestly faced, can we inquire about more serious measures.

Scripture does not have a lot to say about such situations in the church. Certainly some good lessons can be learned in principle about strong willed leaders in the Old Testament, especially during the early years of Israel’s monarchy. Consider Saul, the man who could not relinquish power, Absalom, the man who would stop at nothing to gain it, and Rehoboam, the man who abused it once he had it. What a contrast to the good example of men like David who wielded authority rightly.

In the church, aside from direct intervention by the Lord (which unfortunately, in some cases may be the only answer), there are three logical possibilities as to how to deal with the problem. The first, a confrontation by the congregation, may create more problems than it solves. Without question, godly elders should desire a voluntary accountability to the people among whom they labor. But we are discussing a situation where there probably has been no such accountability for years. Furthermore, even

though elders must be known and submitted to by the people, the ultimate source of their authority comes from God (Acts 20:28) and not the congregation. So it is of questionable value to expect the people to change (or remove) an elder, and in practice it usually doesn’t happen anyway.

The second possibility is for the other elders to face and deal with the situation. It will help if they have already established some guidelines as to what qualifies (and disqualifies) an elder for service. In order to restore a healthy working relationship, there will probably need to be some repentance by any who have not been functioning, and a new commitment to distribute the work load more evenly.

When the controlling elder is strong willed and cannot submit to anyone else, the other elders will need to take loving but firm action to deal with him. Support for this difficult work is essential at such a time. The people of the church should pray fervently.

Help might also come from outside the assembly which leads us to the third option; assistance from a trusted Christian servant in the larger body of Christ. The apostle John faced a domineering

man named Diotrephes (III John 1:9) in one of the assemblies he visited. He does not say what action he would take, only that he would remember that man’s deeds when he came. At the least, it implies some help to the assembly from a respected brother coming in from the outside.

Paul, in writing instructions to Timothy, is more explicit about dealing with elders who need correction. He writes; “*Them that sin, rebuke before all that others may fear...*” (I Tim. 5:20). Based on these passages, it does not seem unreasonable for an assembly struggling with an unaccountable brother to request help from respected servants of God who have maintained a long standing relationship with the particular local church.

Conclusion

There are no easy answers. But the idea of “peace at any price” must give way to the greater good of a healthy, balanced leadership team. At stake is the blessing and growth of the Lord’s work, and the testimony of the church in that locale.

One thing is certain, younger men will never desire to share in the work of feeding the flock if it means going along with a rubber stamp kind of leadership. A true working plurality is one of the hallmarks of the New Testament church, and must be preserved blameless before the saints and the world. There is only One qualified to be the Head of the Church: the Lord Jesus Christ. 

Shepherding Begins At Home

by Ruth Spender

Being the wife of a spiritual leader means you are married to someone who is on call 24/7 to help others. Our husbands are faced with meeting the various needs of the Lord's people: leading, protecting and feeding the flock of God. Often our men return home tired, worn and weary from this spiritual work. They are seeking a haven where they can rest and recover. Little thought may be given to the needs under one's own roof, especially if there are no apparent problems. In this setting, how can a wife have her own needs met and at the same time provide for the needs of her husband? How can she effectively communicate her own needs to be shepherded?

As wives, we are called to be helpmeets. Eph 5:22 in the Amplified New Testament reads "Wives be subjected - be submissive and adapt yourself to your own husband as a service to the Lord." This requires divine enabling as it does not come naturally. How can

you adapt yourself to be a help to your shepherd husband and be blessed in the process? Remember, it is a spiritual principle that in giving we receive.

To adapt or conform to your mate, you must spend time together. It is only as you do this that you really get to know each others' needs. Do you know what your husband's interests, his spiritual gifts, his biggest challenges, his deepest fears, his areas of struggle are? I am amazed as I talk with elders' wives how few couples spend quality time together. Many seldom read God's Word and pray together. This is a necessary starting place. As you spend time reading, praying and talking together, you will begin to experience a stronger marital bond, a greater number of answered prayers as well as many other needs being met. God's Word encourages us as wives to ask our husbands spiritual questions at home (1 Cor 14:35). This is for the mutual blessing of both part-

ners. Wonderful discussion and growth can result from a wife's thoughtful question.

In the marriage relationship, a husband needs to know that his wife values his spiritual input into her life. A Godly man desires to sanctify his wife and cleanse her by the washing with the Word as it is stated in Eph. 5:26. But any rejection on the part of the wife may kill his desire to share his thoughts with her. A wise wife is one who is prudent and sensitive in the way she handles this matter.

As we relate rightly to the Lord, our husbands and ourselves, we will see that our marriage can run as it was designed to. One positive result will be that many different needs will be met in our lives, including our spiritual need to be shepherded. Patiently take the time to build your relationship with your husband to the point where you can minister effectively to each other. I promise you that the outcome will be very gratifying. 

Letting Go Of Criticism

by Chuck Gianotti

Letting go is absolutely required of elders. That is, letting go of offenses against us. This is related to forgiveness (see ESN Volume 7 Numbers 3 & 4—May & July, 2006). But sometimes people criticize elders unjustly and never own up to their offense. They can be quite harsh. Becoming an elder can be like stepping into the line of fire!

Might as well get used to it! I don't mean developing a callousness, but an ability to weather criticism in a godly way. Criticism happens! So what do we do about it?

First realize that criticism of elders can occur for a number of reasons: 1) It is always easier to criticize the leadership as a group than to deal with problems individually 2) Elders are an easy target 3) People think elders are spiritual giants who aren't emotionally affected by criticism. 4) People often think of their criticism simply as "feedback" 5) People think they need to be forceful in order to be heard. 6) We elders can become "gun shy" and misinterpret honest feedback as harsh criticism. 7) Elders get very little positive feedback to give emotional cushion for the legitimate criticisms that we need to hear. 8) The rarity of positive encouragement can be interpreted as implied criticisms. The list goes on. Being an elder is not for the faint-hearted, the people-pleaser or the thin-skinned.

Failure to deal well with criticism will compromise an elder's ability to shepherd the flock of God. Here are some positive things that can help in handling negative "feedback."

1) Recognize you aren't alone. For some, it can be a shattering experience the first time they are severely criticized. If this is your

experience, take heart, it means at the very least, that you are doing something noticeable. One brother told me early in my ministry, "A man who never makes a mistake, is a man who never does anything." Every elder who wants to make a difference *will* be criticized.

2) Look for the kernel of truth in every criticism. Why let a great learning opportunity go to waste! You may learn something about yourself or your leadership that needs to change. Thank the Lord you can learn it now and avoid more heartache over this in the future. Maybe you will learn something about the one criticizing you? Often, criticism may reflect a spiritual derailment in the person's life.

3) See this as an opportunity to broaden your shoulders and enlarge your heart. It is not uncommon for a child to blurt out to the disciplining parent, "I hate you." The insecure parent will go into a tailspin and either get harshly angry back at the child or capitulate so that the child will "like me." Wise parents will set aside their hurt feelings, and deal properly with the child. Elders likewise need to look beyond the criticism to the needs of the individual. He or she is still one for whom Christ died, and still needs shepherding.

4) Let go of your animosity toward your criticizer. Not every criticism can be fully resolved and responded to. Don't let a boat load of hurt feelings and grudges build up. Most elders wouldn't admit to holding grudges, but we can easily put up walls that limit our compassion for people who have been hard on us. Elders, though,

are called to a higher standard. Though all Christians are as well, elders provide a model to others.

5) Finally, continue to love the individual unconditionally! Funny how that is easy to say concerning unsaved relatives. But how much more should we show unconditional love to those in the household of faith!

"For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly ... if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." 1 Peter 2:19-23

"To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing." 1 Peter 3:8-9

"Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed ... but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts ... and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong." 

Change and Truth (cont.)

That's how a family should operate. Family is important!

As leaders in the church, the *family* of God is important! All practical decisions should be made with what is best in mind for the *family* and with as much *family* input as possible. In the end, the leaders are the ones who will answer for the decision, but such an approach to decision involves the whole family. Genuine leadership does not simply force people to follow. Rather, leadership is the art of influencing others toward a goal. Elders need the skill of a loving, wise father as we lead or consider change.

The Spiritual

We have seen that the practical leading of the church should be conditioned by our understanding of the local church being a family. Also, leading should be rooted in the fact that the church is the *pillar* and the *support* of the truth (1 Tim 5:15b). Shepherding the local church is not simply a matter of expedience or human logic. The way we lead matters, because truth of what the church is matters. To put it another way, the day to day outworking of ministry displays what truth looks like in practical clothes.

The church is guardian and promoter of God's truth. We are not here for secondary reasons, like constructing large buildings or large congregations (by secondary, I don't mean unimportant, but I mean to emphasize priority). This emphasis on truth does not diminish the practical aspect of church conduct, nor does it minimize God's desire for us to reach many people for Christ. Paul's point here is to keep everything moored to the truth. A good question to ask when practical change is being considered is, "How does this relate to our guarding and propagating the truth of God?"

The Connection

So, how does the practical really connect with the spiritual, so that we are not just using empty words? In verse 16, Paul indulges in one of his frequent outbreaks of pure theology! To him the connection is so obvious he

can't contain his praise. The thing that brings believers into one household of God is a "common confession!" As some translations imply, there is no *disputing* what Paul is about to say. He goes on to say, "*Great is the mystery of godliness.*" By mystery he does not mean unknowable. Outside the household of faith these things remain enigmatic at best, but to the Christian they are an ongoing discovery and constant delight. We are part of God's household because of Christ, and this truth binds us together as brother and sister in the household of God!

What is it about godliness that rivets Paul? He writes of the godliness of Christ's incarnation, resurrection, humility, mission, salvation and glorification. Suffice it to say here that practical ministry is not to be divorced from godliness. Our ministry must have as its goal to support and promote godliness. This is what makes us distinct from business or social organizations! Another good question to ask of any ministry or proposed change is this: "How does this change promote and encourage a better understanding or appreciation or experience of true godliness as found in our Lord Jesus Christ? How will this help people in this direction?"

Paul does not spend a lot of time on the connection here, because his purpose is more practical than theological. But it is a fair question to ask how these doctrinal statements about Christ and godliness relate to the practical behavior in the church. Concerning the first line, "revealed in the flesh," we might ask how a new ministry or a change in an existing ministry would help believers understand or experience the incarnation of Christ better? Are we behaving in Christ-like ways as we promote our perspective of ministry? Do people see the likeness of Christ, as it were, incarnate in us as we discuss, debate, disagree and unite about things? Does a particular ministry or change help us emulate Christ better?

Phil 2:1-8 certainly is applicable here, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ...*" (Phil 2:5 KJV). Our theol-

ogy of Christ becoming human provides the foundation for godliness in our thinking and behavior. We should allow Christ to live out His mind in us. The same kind of connection can be made with the other five lines of 1 Tim 3:16 passage. You see, Paul's point is that our theology undergirds our practice and behavior.

While there are many decisions about ministry and structure that the Bible does specifically address, the connection with godliness in this passage will so affect us that we are better able to make wise, spiritual, sound decisions. Neither making changes nor holding to traditions are of much value if divorced from the bedrock of faith and godliness. There simply is no promise of the Spirit's affirmation. Rather, the success of the ministry does not rise or fall on man's ideas and abilities, but on godliness.

Vice Versa

Focusing on practical without the spiritual leads to human institutions more akin to a business, rather than a family. However, focusing solely on the spiritual without giving wise, careful thought to the practical aspect of ministry leads to confusion and dead orthodoxy. It's like elevating 1 Tim 3:16 out of Paul's letter and discarding the rest. Such a church winds up being either a pre-Acts 6 church with no wise leadership or an Ephesian church of Revelation 2 that has "forgotten" how to behave in love.

Conclusion

Paul's passion for sound leadership practice is rooted in central truths of the faith! Both are needed—and in the right order. If these things are rightly understood, then the church is free to change as needed, without becoming loosed from its anchor of truth. It is relatively easy to remain faithful to the truth, and it is relatively easy to make changes to our practice. But it is extremely difficult to do both. Let us not err to one side or the other! Let us boldly stand on the unwavering truths of our faith, and be willing to adapt to more effectively shepherd the flock of God that is under our care. 

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"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers ..." 1 Peter 5:2a NIV