



Editor's Note

We always enjoy notes of appreciation for the work of ESN (or APA, Spanish edition). A recent one was special because the writer valued past articles which can be found in the archives on line.

Glancing at the index from past years, I was reminded of brief series on subjects like The Work of Elders (2000), Spiritual Gifts (2001), Small Group Ministry (2002), The Family Life of Elders (2007), Elders and the Prayer Life of the Church (2011), Studies in Acts (2015), Thoughts on Local Church

'Alive-ness' (2017), Keep Your Balance in the Quest for Fellowship (2020).

Hopefully, these articles in series can be a resource for elders so we continue to run them. More recent series include an OT overview by Bob Spender, NT overview by Warren Henderson (ongoing), and a series on missions by Jim Fleming (ongoing; this issue). Interested? Check the archives at

www.eldersshopnotes.com or
www.apuntes-para-ancianos.org



Biblical Principles: Elders and Missions

Step 5: The Missionaries and Their Elders by Jim Fleming

My desire in this series of articles is to stimulate our leaders to reignite a mission vision in our assemblies, plus adding some biblically based practical applications for missions in the third millennium. Step 1 was: Elders, keep Missions on your Radar. Then Step 2: Sending out Missionaries the Bible Way from Acts 13, while Step 3 introduced: The Mission Mandate Morphing, and Step 4: The Jungles of Missions are Different Today.

In Step 5 I want to emphasize the biblical relationship of missionaries and their elders, irrespective of the century, the kind of missions being practiced, or the personalities involved. I begin with a real-life illustration of a missionary who often causes unnecessary problems for himself which naturally affect his mission work. I came to understand the root of this one day when we were discussing Acts 15:40, which reads: "but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God."

The brother referred to interprets being "commended to the grace of God" as meaning that he is under no authority except the Lord's. He has been entrusted to the Lord's care by his elders to whom he will give reports, but he does not expect guidance or involvement in his mission work from them. The Lord is the only one to whom he is responsible. Others have no right to question his work or methods. You get the picture? Do you know missionaries or full-time workers who live out this view? Sometimes it is presented as spiritual, under the guise of autonomy, a popular term in Brethren circles, but very difficult to define since it's a non-New Testament term.

By comparison, Acts 15:40 relates the

occasion on which Paul is commended to a second missionary journey by his home assembly in Antioch. But note Paul's attitude and relationship to his assembly at the end of the first missionary journey: "From there they sailed back to Antioch where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. After they arrived and gathered the church together, they reported everything God had done with them and that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:26-27 CSB).

Question: from these and other scriptures, is there a biblical model for the relationship between the *missionary and local church leadership* which teaches how being "commended to the grace of God" is biblically lived out? Here are some protocols of a scriptural missionary-elder relationship.

Apprenticed in the church context

Acts 11:26 (NIV): "So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

- Paul was very active in the local assembly before he went out on missions.
- Paul was gifted and his gifts were evident to the church.
- Paul's ministry was effective and helped a great many people at home.
- Paul was invited by and was serving under the leadership of the church.
- Elders: younger ones should be apprenticed to you and fruitful before commendation.

Active in practical service

Acts 11:29-30: "Each of the disciples, ac-

(Continued on page 3)

Biblical Teaching

“Where are the Nine?” by Jack Spender

Of the countless words and deeds of the Lord Jesus during His earthly life and ministry, it's interesting to ponder why certain items were chosen to be part of Holy Scripture. Surely the answer must be deeper than simply a random sampling of the Lord's activities. No, the Scripture tells us these things “were written for our learning” (Rom. 15:4), and are “God-breathed”; “all Scripture is...profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16). Profitable to better know the Lord, knowing the kinds of things He did and taught; profitable for our growth and maturity; profitable for the conviction and correction of sins; and much more. The believer delights in tracing the rich spiritual lessons and principles that help us “walk even as He walked” (1 John 2:6). As we embrace the truths and principles of His life, He becomes our life pattern, and we are “changed into the same image... as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Let's think about one of those special records now, in Luke 17, where Jesus healed some lepers. We know that He did good things, that He served needy people, that He wanted to glorify His Father, but all this we can learn from many other passages. What's special about this one?

First, a brief summary of the account. Ten men with leprosy called to Jesus for help. He told them what to do, and as they went to obey, they were healed. The story could have ended there. But we have an interesting addition. One man, when he saw that he truly was healed, turned back from the group, and gave thanks to the Lord. Have you ever thought about what the Lord *might* have said to this thankful man? “How nice that you are thankful,” or, “Why aren't you doing as I told you, going to find the priests?”

Now consider what He actually did say: “Were there not ten cleansed, but where are the nine?” Here is a wonderful insight into the heart of our Lord. How can we describe it? That “giving

glory to God” is very important—indeed, that God expects it. Note that this man's gratitude was not just silent in the heart, he was public about it. It didn't matter who was listening or what they thought about it. We might say that his heart was overflowing with thankfulness.

Surely there is a message here for us. As those who have received mercy from the Lord, we should be known as thankful people. We can give thanks “in everything” (1 Thes. 5:18), and “for all things” (Eph. 5:20). But not only are we privately thankful for blessings received, we can, on occasion, speak out to others about what God has done for us. Several Scriptures exhort us not to be ashamed of the Lord nor of the “good news.” But further, we have the privilege and the responsibility to give thanks publicly at the Lord's table every week, just by our presence, and perhaps in song or spoken word.

Back to the story of the lepers. Do you think the healing that the other nine received suddenly disappeared because they did not turn back and give thanks? Likely not. Romans 11:29 tells us that “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance,” i.e., God does not take His gifts back.

Think about the account from the perspective of the nine. As lepers, they were banished from family and social life, a lonely existence, probably until death, “outside the camp.” Now suddenly, they had new, clean flesh, and once approved by the authorities, could rejoin their families, shop in the markets, and even attend temple worship! They must have been excited and could hardly wait to show themselves to the priests. How can we be critical of all this?


But the fact remains that some distance back on the road, there was One Who cared for them and gave them back their very lives, and what was His perspective? “*Where are the nine?*” May I suggest without any judgment or criticism that this scene is a power-

ful picture of what often takes place today? How many Christians, truly born again, take the time, or even have the opportunity in their church services to lay aside all the ministries, sermons, programs and performances to sit with others in the presence of the Lord and give thanks? It is a rare thing. And the number of saints who meet in churches that seek to follow the NT pattern of a dedicated time for remembrance and worship is rather small.

The Samaritan man was only 10% of the group healed, and we do not read of him speaking any critical words about the other 90%. He just wanted

He just wanted to come back to the feet of the One Who had so blessed him that his heart overflowed.

to come back to the feet of the One Who had so blessed him that his heart overflowed. Remember, it was the Lord Who asked, “Where are the nine?” In John 4:25 we are told that the Father seeks true worshipers! Is worship a priority for us, or just a tradition? We can become like some who said, “The table of the Lord...what a weariness it is” (Mal. 1:12,13).

It seems to be a principle throughout the Scriptures: the closer you get to the Lord, the fewer will be in your company. So beloved, let us meet with others who turn back from all the attractive things available, and enjoy the best thing here on earth, meeting around the Savior just to give thanks. The earliest believers learned the blessing of this and gave testimony that “he was known to them in the breaking of bread” (Luke 24:35). Is your number small? Be content to gather with the few. If the worship is heartfelt, others will be attracted, and it's a good test of love to be thankful that others are blessed who gather differently than we do. The title of an old book says “The best is yet to be.” True words. 

(Continued on next page)

cording to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.”

- The large monetary gift from the Antioch church for the poor in Jerusalem was entrusted to Paul and Barnabas to deliver.
- Paul didn't just want to preach. He was willing to do the difficult tasks as well. This one was probably dangerous. And he was selected to do it.

Elders, give your apprentices practical and difficult tasks when appropriate to prove their humility, determination and work ethic.

Affirmed by the Holy Spirit, but sent out by men

Acts 13:1-3

- Paul is now serving alongside other leading men in the church (v. 1).
- The Holy Spirit affirms to the group while in prayer that Paul and Barnabas were to be sent on a special mission (v. 2).
- Note that it was not some existential “call,” but rather the Holy Spirit made it known through Paul's fellow servants. The Holy Spirit uses men to confirm His will to others in the body (v. 2).
- Finally, the actual commissioning is done by church leaders: “Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off” (v. 3).

Elders, you are responsible to be so in tune with the Holy Spirit that you recognize when He is commissioning work to be done. Believers, we are to respect that the Spirit often uses our elders to counsel, guide, and even commission us to certain duties in the church or in missions.

Accountable to the elders

Acts 14:27: “After they arrived and gathered the church together, they reported everything God had done with them and that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (CSB).

- Amazing miracles of missions had occurred on that first journey, but Paul did not set up his own mission

organization and start running his own ministry.

- Paul returned to his elders and church family and humbly gave God the glory for what the Lord had done. Paul reported back.
- Paul made himself accountable to the elders and the church.
- The church then reciprocated by welcoming them back and showing them hospitality for a substantial period of time. We call it furlough. The KJV says it best: “And there they abode a long time with the disciples” (14:28)

Elders, your missionaries welcome accountability while on furlough. Make sure they get some. If they think they don't need rest, ask if they have been working hard on the field. A death-defying attempt to visit every friend and assembly possible is not a furlough. Take measures to ensure they get some restful down-time without speaking responsibilities.

Elders, debrief with your missionaries on furlough: How is their marriage? How are they emotionally? Spiritually? What are their finances like? Do they have a retirement savings account? Health insurance—especially while on furlough? Ask the tough questions.

Argue the Truth, but in the counsel of the elders

Acts 15

- In Acts 15, false teaching is opposed in the church at Antioch: “After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue” (v. 2)
- Paul, the great missionary, stands tough against false teaching, but he does not decide the case by himself and impose his personal interpretation.
- Under the guidance of his local elders, Paul joins a delegation to go to the source of the problem, Jerusalem, and come to a mutual agreement on the truth and practice of Scripture.

Elders, know the beliefs, hermeneutics, and spiritual practices of your

missionaries. If there are differences in doctrines held and practiced by your missionary on his field, it should be discussed, understood, and agreed upon. There are many cases of missionaries practicing and teaching things that would scandalize their home assembly! Why don't the people supporting the missionary know about this?

Accessible—the brilliance of simple communication

This is the answer to the last question. Unhealthy independence is bred by ignorance that comes from a lack of accountability between the missionary and his elders.

Some concluding practical suggestions to make accountability positive and natural:

- Elders, consider visiting your missionaries and see them in action. It is relatively quick, easy, and inexpensive now. Missionaries, be honest in what you show your elders when there!
- Elders, if possible each one of you can call (don't write; that's old-school) one of your missionaries every 2 to 3 weeks. WhatsApp and other internet platforms are free and even a video call can be made. Missionaries, ask the elder calling (including his wife), how you can pray for them. Become friends. And yes, texting can be immediate, takes mere seconds and can show continual interest and moral support.
- Elders, talk about issues: ask questions; understand their thinking; yes, talk about their favorite sports team, too! Missionaries, be real; tell them when you are hurting; ask advice about a tough counseling issue in the church; let them know if you are near burn-out. Pretending all is well is not spiritual. Oh, and share the fun things your kids did or said this week!

Conclusion

Perhaps the accessibility of the elders and missionaries just talking frequently would solve any autonomously independent understandings some have about “being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.”



Wives' Corner

Weeds by Marsha Blair

Spring is the time of year when things begin to grow rapidly; almost overnight we notice the trees turning green and the flowers blooming. This is also a good time for the growth of weeds in our yards and gardens.

When we lived in Pennsylvania, we had a flower bed with a large crop of thistle weeds growing in it. Almost overnight they grew, flowered, went to seed, and spread into the yard. They were tall, and the flowers were beautiful, but the leaves and stems were covered with little thorns that were painful when I tried to pull them out. They had spread so much into the yard that there was an area that was nothing but thistle leaves, with hardly a blade of grass. They had such long, strong roots that I had to dig out each one with a shovel, which was hard, back-breaking work.

Thistles are very persistent and come back year after year. They spread easily and grow much faster than the good plants which I wanted to cultivate. They are also invasive and require vigilance. Neglect them for a short time and they will take over your garden. They are hardy and destructive and grow best in shaded areas.

As I was battling the thistles in my flower garden, it made me think of how easily sins can take over my life and choke out the good that I want to do for the Lord. Like those thistles, sins can:

Be shade-loving—grow fastest in the dark when we are not walking in the light with the Lord (Eph. 5:8).

Be hardy and destructive—choke out the good in our lives; mar our testimony for the Lord. Other people can be affected by our sins (2 Sam. 12:13-14).

Spread and be invasive. If we become complacent, sins can take over our life. We must be vigilant (Matt. 26:41).

Multiply—much faster than do the “good things,” the fruit of the Spirit in my life (Gal 5:22-23).

Be persistent. They keep cropping up in our lives (Rom. 7:18-19).

If we recognize something in our life that is a particularly thorny, long-rooted “weed,” we need to pray and ask the Lord to help us overcome it.

*He delights to help His
children grow in grace.*

He delights to help His children grow in grace. One sin that I have had to watch and pray about in my life is a critical spirit. A critical attitude can be very destructive in a home or in an assembly, and is the opposite of what the Lord wants us to do, which is love and encourage one another. I am still a long way from getting rid of this particular weed, but with the Lord's help I am working on it. Perhaps you are dealing with the same sin, or something just as troubling for you. He can give you the strength to triumph over it. And we must always remember that God is a God of forgiveness and restoration.

As we spend time with the Lord in reading and studying the Bible, prayer, and fellowship with His people, He will strengthen us to uproot the sins that invaded our lives, and to live a life that is pleasing to Him. Let us pray for ourselves, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, that the weeds that are growing in our garden will be uprooted and destroyed, and that we will bear precious fruit for Him and “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).



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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers” 1 Peter 5:2a NKJV