

Section 1

The Dilemma of Traditions, or
But We Have Always
Done It This Way

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BELIEVERS BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Jeff Curtis, Pastor

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Dear Dr. Mills,

It is hard to believe that it has been six months since I last wrote you.¹ I am at the end of our summer season here at Believers Bible Fellowship, and, as usual, the summer “vacation” time has left me worn out! With Vacation Bible School, juggling teachers and schedules for our Sunday school program, the regular run of pastoral counseling crises, and continuing questions on the nature of the New Testament Church, I feel somewhat like the mother who has come full term and is ready for the birth process. Not only would that relieve me of some of the *load* I am carrying, but would start the *new life* of the assembly that I think our church, and the larger body of Christ, realize is *overdue*.

As I told you in my last letter², our church’s recent growth in membership has forced me, and our church, to rethink why we

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are doing things the way we are. Let me remind you of the essential questions I asked:

1. How does a church pursue intimacy in relationships, both with God and among its membership, rather than simply maintaining the programs and structures of the assembly?
2. What is this thing called Church Growth? While most of what I read, and most of what I secretly desire, seems to say that Growth is measured by *numbers*, the New Testament seems to say that *love of God, and love of others* is the real measure of success.
3. Finally, and probably the greatest concern to me as a pastor, what does the Scripture really say about me as a shepherd of the flock? Is it correct for one man to carry the principle pastoral load of an assembly. And, here, I am not concerned so much with whether it is possible or not, or difficult or not, but whether it is biblical or not!

Essentially, what is the New Testament blueprint for church leadership? If that can be firmly established in my mind, then I think I will be most willing to work hard toward what is the will of God, and lasts best in the Kingdom of God, in our church.

Give my love to your wife and boys, and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

For Jesus' sake,

Jeff

—PROCLAIMING CHRIST IN OUR DAY—

Robert leaned back in his chair, and read carefully Jeff's letter a second time. A certain question caught his eye: *what is the New Testament blueprint for church leadership?*

Robert could think of a related question that had been troubling

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him. He had been impressed in his recent reading with the preoccupation of the New Testament writers concerning Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd. In other words, Jesus was the Shepherd of the Church. But how did this leadership work out in practice? Was His Word consulted in board meetings, in Sunday School committee meetings, and in the homes of believers as the *primary authority* for life and practice? Robert realized, in a rather candid reflection, that it was all too easy to give *lip service* to the primacy and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ in the work of the Church without actually consulting Him, and His Word, with much regularity or integrity.

Actually, this thought brought more questions to Robert's mind. In a recent survey he read, he discovered that as many as one out of four pastors currently serving in local churches expressed a strong consideration toward resigning their pastorates! At times he identified with that thought, though he didn't really let himself even think it.

Further, while his concern was constantly for the image projected by his church (the phrase *his church* caught, for a few seconds, in his mind) on Sunday morning, he was aware as well that the *back door* was just about as large as the *front door* at Raleigh Hills Bible Church. There was the constant challenge to maintain the membership numbers to support the financial needs of the church—both the pastoral staff, the building and program needs, and the commitments to foreign missions. Membership was maintaining at between 800 and 900 who were regularly committed, but regular agenda items at the monthly board meetings included things like *broadening the support base* or *developing the constituency* or *creating a sense of identity and commitment*.

Robert knew that the *primary* purpose for these discussions was the *nickels and numbers* agenda—by necessity. Was that right?

And, finally, Robert reflected on all that the traditional American Church had asked of its Sunday morning meetings. Since seventy percent of a church's membership attends only on Sunday morning,

this had become a time when the *principal* emphasis on training and maturity had been the focus. Yet the limitations of a few leaders with large numbers of believers strained the dimensions of ministry asked of our Sunday morning meetings.

Robert straightened back up in his chair as he thought through the related questions that Jeff's letter had spawned. Jeff's questions were hard enough—he didn't need to make the job, and his answers for Jeff, any harder!

IF CHRIST IS THE ANSWER, WHAT ARE THE QUESTIONS

For Robert, the issue had to begin with Christ, for the Church was and is His Body, purchased with His blood, and a people belonging to God. Yet, it is fair to note that if Christ is the first, middle and end of Church doctrine and practice, then what are the appropriate ways Church leaders, as undershepherds, are means, or *questions*, toward that end, or *answer*.

Yet, while Christian doctrine, and the New Testament, affirmed the place of Christ as Head of the Church, Robert knew his place was strategic for the life of Raleigh Hills Bible Church. Maybe not indispensable, but very strategic. Case-by-points: First, he was the visible head of the Church. When questions of doctrine or church conduct were brought up, his was the final answer. That seemed reasonable to Robert—what with his training and ministry experience.

Second, his position as pastor was a special calling by God. In a sense, he was not accountable to men, but to God. (Robert wasn't sure how that all worked out in accountability-relationships with the board, but he sure he was right on that. It certainly *sounded* right.)

As he read, and reread, the Scriptures, it seemed that his unique position in his (there was that word again) local church was most clearly supported by two basic facts of biblical history. First, by the model of the prophet. Certainly the office of the pastor functioned

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similarly to that of the prophet, and, as such, he was God’s spokesman to Raleigh Hills Bible Church. Second, the model of the preacher in the New Testament identified his singular place in the church, and especially justified the primary emphasis of Sunday morning, and the focus on worship and instruction. This was no small matter, for his preparation for preaching took up a majority of his working week—at least according to his job description.

Robert rolled the words “prophet” and “preacher” over in his mind. He decided he was more comfortable with thinking of himself as a preacher than a prophet—though every pastor knew there were times he had to be forceful—if that was what a prophet or mouthpiece for God entailed. Either way these considerations seemed to prove the point—at least they always had in Robert’s mind. Both the authority granted him by the church, and the various ways Scripture seemed to justify that position, placed ed him, and every senior pastor in a unique, and singular, place of leadership in his church.

Once Robert had rethought these issues after reading the letter from his young friend, he determined to think through Jeff’s questions specifically. First,

1. How does a church pursue intimacy in relationships?

Relationships was a subject that Robert had not, to this point in his ministry-experience, spent a lot of time thinking about. Actually, his relationship to God was a point of primary concern and attention. He had been taught from his teen years, when he first believed in Christ as his Savior, that a quiet time was vital to his relationship with God. And he had been faithful in that—even with the pressures of the pastorate. He wasn’t quite as sure how his devotional-life fit together with his study-life, but his relationship with his Savior and Lord was of primary importance to him.

But when it came to relationships with others, his thinking on relational intimacy was not as developed. He certainly loved his wife and four boys, and had a commitment to them that came just

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under his commitment to God, and his ministry. That seemed right to him. After all, his calling as a Christian included his vocation as a pastor, and, as such, required that he put God before even family.

Nevertheless, something intuitively told him that in the New Testament God expects the home to be the proving ground for qualification for ministry. If that were so, and could be proven biblically, then how could ministry come before family? Rather, in fact, family must come before ministry in order to illustrate the qualification of a man to the ministry. He suspected that, while that was probably true of laymen who were leaders in the church, it was not the case for him. His position must be seen similar to the disciples who were willing to leave all—including family—in order to follow Christ. That was something he decided he needed to study more closely.

When Robert's mind ranged to relational intimacy in the church, the needs seemed endless. Honestly, he admitted he had few friends in the assembly. His relationship with his church staff was primarily task-oriented, and that seemed important to him in order to avoid the appearance of partiality. There were two or three families in the church who he, and his wife and boys, spent the most time with. But each of the men in these families were successful businessmen in the community, and the extent of common ground of understanding was limited. How could they, for example, really understand the pressures of the pastorate without having experienced it?

Robert wasn't sure he should have, or need, friends in the church. He remembered that one professor in seminary had cautioned against that. It seemed like the concern was for the integrity of the office of pastor, or the vulnerability of friendships, or something—he couldn't remember exactly. That never seemed right to Robert, but, practically speaking, there just wasn't *time* for friendships, or brother-to-brother relationships. How many primary relationships can one man maintain? Beyond family and ministry demands, genuine relational intimacy seemed improbable.

That seemed to be the full extent of Jeff's first question until Robert remembered his unbelieving neighbor, and the subject of

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evangelism! Now he began to feel very guilty. In one sense, he felt a greater obligation to reach out in friendship to his neighbor than even other believers in his church. After all, Christians are saved, and going to heaven. In that sense, unbelievers are more needy, with eternal issues more critical and pronounced. But friendship—even relational intimacy—with an unbelieving neighbor?

Robert wondered what he might have in common with his neighbor. They served different masters, worked in distinctly different circles, and even had weekly schedules that rarely placed them in similar places at similar times. How could a relationship develop, to any sense of intimacy, with all that against it?

Of course Christ would have mixed with, and been among, the unbelievers. He seemed to make a point of being available to them, being with them, and even eating with them. But then Christ did not have to deal with the modern pressures of the 20th century world. (That thought first surprised, and then amused, Robert. Theologically speaking, Christ must have faced the same pressures and, by his life, demonstrated the right priorities—but Robert still did not understand how it all fit together.) Maybe lunch would help to clear his thinking!

THE PROVERBIAL ROCK AND HARD PLACE

After lunch, Robert had gained a better perspective on the questions raised by Jeff's letter in the morning. He had been to lunch with one of his deacons, who had questions about the deacons' fund, the proposed building additions for the church, and the need for a bible study for businessmen in their city. As Robert worked through these questions with his deacon, he realized anew what his place was in the church. There may be a sense in which everything he was doing couldn't be clearly proven biblically. But that was one of the weakness of his young friend Jeff. Jeff was too idealistic—he would learn with time. The important thing, as Robert thought about

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it in his car after lunch, was that he was a vital part of the church, and was doing a work for his Lord. Maybe his relationships with his neighbors were not the best, but then God had called him to the pastorate. No one could do everything. He imagined that laymen must have more time for neighbors than he did. At least he was certain they had more evenings!

So, as Robert thought about it, relational intimacy was a fair concern for the Church, but from a pastor's standpoint, he was doing the good and best thing as he maintained his love for his God, and shepherded the flock as an outgrowth of his commitment to Him. He suspected Jeff would have some more questions about that, but he was confident he could explain the realities of the pastorate to his young friend.

Now, to the second question in Jeff's letter:

2. What is this thing called Church Growth?

Robert wondered for a minute about the tone of this question. He wasn't sure whether Jeff was trying to be funny, by calling church growth a *thing*, or whether there was an attitudinal problem. After deciding he couldn't know for sure without further communication, Robert began to think through his understanding of the subject.

Church growth was something Robert had studied at some length. His study shelves in his offices contained no less than 30 books on the subject. This had been a subject of growing interest in Church Studies in America in the last 10 years, and Robert felt a personal and vocational obligation to stay abreast of current issues and thinking.

Essentially, Church Growth, as Robert surveyed his thinking, was the study of the numerical growth of the Church—resulting from conversions described in the New Testament as salvation. It was illustrated by the rapid expansion of the gospel, and the New Testament Church, in the book of Acts.

From a leadership standpoint, Robert was convinced, and much

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of what he read agreed, *that a dynamic, single-head pastor is the key to successful church growth*. The current literature indicated that, and Robert's ministry-experience confirmed it. While a number of factors contributed to growth—things like people worshipping *with their own kind of people*, and a celebration form of worship on Sunday morning (though Robert was not sure what this meant)—nevertheless, from his perspective as a senior pastor, *he was the key to the growth of Raleigh Hills Bible Church*.

Again, mentally surveying biblical history, Robert reflected on the strategic place of dynamic leadership in the Scriptures. Had not God used Noah and Abraham in singularly ways? Did not Moses and Joshua provide critical leadership for the young nation Israel? Wasn't God pleased with King David, and his son Solomon—despite some periods of colossal failure in their lives? And the list goes on—and extends even into the gospels and epistles. Certainly that Church Growth principle was correct. God's Kingdom-purposes in any age often depends on the faith and courage of one man who is willing to step out and provide strong leadership for a people. Such seemed to be the case for Robert, and his role as pastor, although he often felt inadequate for the job.

Yet Robert had not just read in his area of concern—he had noticed, and read somewhat, a new series of books coming out on multiple leadership, or the plurality of elders who serve in each local assembly. At first Robert thought it just some publishing done by Plymouth Brethren authors, but names like Getz and Richards and Stedman and Stabbert reflected a similar educational background to his own—yet with substantially different conclusions.

Robert knew, as well, from Jeff's return correspondence to him³, that his young colleague was becoming increasingly enamored with this position. While Robert had admitted the need for moving to an Elder Board concept, in order to emphasize the need for laymen to be ministers as well as businessmen, it still seemed vital that there be someone in charge, who can make decisions, settle disputes, and provide professional pastoral services.

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Realizing that he had already spent too much time thinking about Jeff's letter, and that he needed to dictate a response to his friend as he collected his thoughts, Robert hastened on to the third question:

3. What does the Scripture really say about a pastor as the shepherd of the flock?

Relieved, time-wise, Robert realized he had already thought through that question, except for a careful biblical reappraisal. Confident he could respond with reasonable biblical accuracy, Robert pulled his micro pocket transcriber from a desk drawer, and began to dictate a response to Jeff.