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# Typical Solutions to Traditional Problems

RALEIGH HILLS BIBLE CHURCH

Dr. Robert Mills, Senior Pastor

August 21

Dear Jeff,

I've decided two things about us. First, I'm humbled by your faithfulness and confidence in my counsel. Second, I'm thankful that I can call you *friend* as well as acquaintance and colleague.

In reflecting on your letter of August 16 I again was thankful that God brought us together early in your Christian experience. I remember some of your early struggles, and, frankly, none of us would have guessed that you would have gone on to seminary and the pastorate. But then, that is true of all of us—I'm sure.

Your questions were good, and welcome, and I probably spent more time on them than my schedule allowed. But they were a stimulus for thinking, and I trust we both can benefit from our mutual correspondence.

## A New Testament Blueprint for Church Leadership

I find my thinking on leadership influenced by three things: first, my understanding of Scripture; second, my study of current books on the subject; and, third, my personal experience. I've found that theory has to be balanced with experience, and . . .

Jeff was both pleased, and somewhat surprised, at Dr. Mills quick response to his letter. He knew, as well, about the demands of the pastorate, and imagined that these demands doubled up on a pastor as his church grew.

Jeff knew, as well, about ministry pressure. As pastor of a smaller, but growing, assembly, he had, since his last letter to Dr. Mills, recommended to his church that they purchase a church building on the outskirts of their community. They, as a church, were currently evaluating the cost, and possible additional ministry options provided by a building.

Ironically, Jeff thought, we as Christian leaders all have the same Source Book for authority, and we all say we look at it first. That is both the good and right place to begin. But, as Jeff discovered in his last correspondence with Dr. Mills, his former pastor and mentor was quite tradition-bound. While saying the Bible was his first authority, in fact, the third factor—namely, personal experience, seemed to rule out basic and central passages on church leadership and growth. He hoped that would not be so much the case in this letter.

. . . the classroom balanced with the boardroom.

The subject of *relationships* seems, to me, to be both interesting and dangerous for pastoral study. It is interesting because I think all of us in professional ministry need reminders about balance—balance in our relationships with our Lord, with other believers, and, frankly, a firm boot toward relationships with unbelievers. I had to realize that I have practically no relationships with *any* unbelievers—beyond a casual and surface relationship with a neighbor—except for an unsaved cousin, whom I pray for regularly.

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But I think an emphasis on relational intimacy is somewhat faddish, if not dangerous, as well. I see things written in Christian magazines about the need to love ourselves, and to love others, and I wonder if that fits the ministry model of a Paul or Peter that aggressively confronted critics of the Way. It seems that we all need to guard against imbalance . . .

Pastor Jeff's suspicions, concerning his mentor's inability to evaluate a subject biblically, rose slowly to the surface as he read on in the letter. Understandably, theology needs to be balanced with practice. But Jeff was not sure the boardroom, with all the world's patterns of decision-making, and of valuing things over people—to over generalize for purposes of a point—provided the proper context for qualifying the classroom, or doctrine.

To this point, Jeff was not yet sure about Dr. Mill's biblical basis for his conclusion. And Jeff certainly agreed that the current emphasis on self-love in order to love others actually was an attempt by well-meaning Christian psychologists to justify clearly prohibited behavior in the lives of saints. But, to say that relational intimacy was faddish or dangerous?

Jeff had recently run into a quote, which had been cited in various Christian periodicals, which went as follows:

*The Church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock, never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick and marble can no more be a church than your clothes of serge and satin can be you. There is in this world nothing sacred but man, no sanctuary of God but the soul.<sup>1</sup>*

Just like some songs that you hear—that you have a hard time forgetting—so this quote had stuck in Jeff's heart and mind. Everything about our culture and world says that reality and success is measured by what you see. And Jeff knew that the aspects of visible

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success most often touted for the Church were the performance and reputation of a pastor, the church building(s), and the size of the congregation. In that sense, someone had said that *nickels, numbers, and noise* reflected success—American-style.

But, in God’s eyes, and by the standard of eternity, Jeff knew that those things could all be done in the flesh, and done *successfully*. He knew, in fact, that God was most concerned with His children, and their fellowship with Him—more than measuring spirituality by what we can see. Scripturally speaking, the Church of the New Testament was the saint; it was a building of flesh and blood, not brick and mortar. It was the believer who prayed, not where he prayed. It was a person’s heart and soul, not his herring-bone and silk.

But could relational intimacy be faddish? Jeff knew his authority was not in extra-biblical sources or quotes. Then he remembered the Scripture, which establishes the dimensions and unity of the Church:

*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Eph 3:6)*

There, Jeff remembered, the Scripture establishes both a vertical relationship with God through Christ, and a unity and identity as a Body of believers that is rooted in grace.<sup>2</sup> That certainly was relational intimacy, and it wasn’t faddish.

Further, the Scriptures record the words of Christ which identify the essentials of Christian concern and ministry:

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all*

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*your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments.* (Matt. 22:34-40)

Believers are to be lovers. Lovers of God, and lovers of others—both believers and unbelievers.<sup>3</sup> Jeff was certain that this, as well, justified concerns for relational intimacy—especially over and against program-maintenance in the Church.

Certainly, Jeff reasoned, even in the best of causes, there can be the danger of imbalance. But, essentially, what can be the guide to possible preoccupation with fads, or dangers of imbalance, if not the records of Revelation?

. . . or idealism.

When it comes to Church Growth, I confess I have done more thinking and reading. There are a number of critical guidelines that establish a climate for growth for a church. And here, I want to speak candidly, Jeff.

The Scripture indicates, by way of illustration, that there is a central place for singular, dynamic pastoral leadership in an assembly. Limited our thinking to the New Testament, it was Christ, who predicted of Peter: “. . . you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.” It was Peter, who was called an apostle to the Jews, and Paul, an apostle to the Gentiles. It was Timothy who was left by Paul in Ephesus to command and teach the church, and it was Titus who was left by Paul at Crete to instruct and appoint elders for the church. This, it seems, is central, dynamic leadership!

Jeff’s interest in the letter from his former pastor and friend heightened. But since our mind works much faster than our reading rate, Jeff’s reading created as many questions as answers. Certainly God has always used men individually and dynamically, recorded in both Testaments, for His Kingdom-purposes. But does that

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prove single-head pastors as vital for Church Growth? Does the pattern of the theocratic ruler of the Old Testament, the apostles of the New Testament, or the apostles' representatives in the Epistles, justify singular leadership authority in the church? Jeff was hard-pressed, in his personal studies of the last year, to conclude that it did. Rather, the pattern of assembly and leadership seemed to be elders who shepherded and taught the church in each region, locality and assembly-group.

These tentative conclusions had come for Jeff after about two years of general reading, and about a year of serious study. He had discovered that the Scriptures, when speaking specifically about leadership in the local assemblies, use three terms: elder, overseer, and pastor. He discovered further that the essential functions of these New Testament leaders were that, as elders, they were to pastor and teach the flock. Further, the distinctions among these elders, as they ministered in these assemblies, was based on diligence or work, and, *in no way, separated out one man among these elders as "first among equals."*<sup>4</sup>

These conclusions were *hard to come by* for Jeff, not because they were not apparently right biblically — in his opinion — but because of the way he was forced to rethink his view of Christian leadership in the Church, and to reconsider the broader relationship of church leadership to believers at Believers Bible Fellowship — both for paid staff, and *laymen*.

For Jeff, this meant that his place in the church remained strategic, but for different reasons. Rather than being seen as the visible head of the Invisible Head, and sought out as the final answer on matters of doctrine and faith, his job, along with other paid elders at the church, was to do what every church elder is to do: shepherd and teach. And, further, his compensated, staff responsibilities included working with the church leadership in a way that improved their pastoral and teaching skills, and provide specific pastoral services — in Jeff's case, some specialized counseling and administrative work — that went beyond the time-constraints of the elders at BBF. But, most

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importantly, BBF and Jeff, had concluded that the New Testament is to make no essential or qualitative distinctions between *laymen* and *professional* ministers or elders, and that the expectation of the Scriptures was that a team of elders were needed—even required—for the proper shepherding of each local assembly.

Therefore, though not to his surprise, Jeff noted with interest, Pastor Mill’s references to professionalism in the ministry, and a place for *singular, dynamic pastoral leadership*. Jeff had come to realize, in conversations with colleagues in his local area, that, while every self-respecting evangelical will say that his primary authority is the Bible, in fact pre-conceptions of church ministry and leadership all-too-easily influence opinion and conclusion. In fact, though he did not want to be harsh, he suspected that Dr. Mills was, rather, letting personal experiences and opinion provide a majority-sway in his thinking, and his reference to illustrations of *singular, dynamic leadership* became more like convenient proof texts to look more biblical rather than to develop a systematic philosophy of ministry from the New Testament. If Jeff was correct in this assumption, then the correspondence would confirm it by citing from reason and experience. His hunch proved correct, as he read on.

Further, Jeff, I have discovered a number of practical reasons why the Church needs this dynamic, pastoral leadership in order to survive:

1. As I’m sure you have noticed, our church people look for one-man leadership. Whether it is the pastoral staff, laymen who are leaders, believers in the pew, or para-church organizations like bible colleges or missions organizations, they all agree: the local church needs strong leadership from the senior pastor. To consider any other alternative would cause major disruption.
2. Further, and related to the above, believers struggle in their Christian walk, and it provides a great encouragement to them if they can see the Person of Christ incarnate, so-to-speak, in the life of a pastor. A pastor, as he serves his

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people, makes the invisible realities of eternity visible (as Robert dictated this part of the letter, he became increasingly excited about the things he was sharing with Jeff, and determined to develop some of the arguments being shared into a series of sermons on the Church for his church).

3. As such, the pastor becomes the model of ministry for his church. He is the primary authority, and the key to motivation and growth for the church. He is the focal point for identity and purpose for the church.
4. He is responsible for feeding the flock—primarily through preaching. As preacher, he provides unique leadership—called by God to lead the flock.
5. He is the professional representative of his school, denomination or affiliation, and is the middle link between healthy local churches and healthy Christian undergraduate and graduate education. As such, his vocation, and financial support, provides the ongoing key to growth in the church.
6. He is the model for evangelism, and by his preaching provides the spoken gospel in a way that results in conversion growth (by now Robert had also glanced at some class notes from a seminar he taught at his denomination's West Coast seminary on the subject of Church Growth and Renewal).

As you can see, Jeff, there . . .

Jeff read, and reread a second time, the six reasons Dr. Mills believed the question of church growth and leadership turned on the abilities of one man—the pastor—for a local church. Each reason had some truth—to a point. First, it was very true that the *expectations* of both the great majority of the believing, as well as the entire number of unbelieving, people in the Christian and non-Christian community would name *the pastor* as one of the two most important credentials of a church. He, along with a church building, legitimized a church in almost everyone's thinking. But did that make it right, or biblical? It certainly would make it hard to change a way



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of thinking, but would it, for that reason, be the best practice for a group of believers meeting in the same geographic area—called *the church* in that community.

Second, everyone needs the invisible made visible, Jeff thought. We had God, invisible, made visible in Christ. We had the grace of Christ, invisible, made visible in the apostles, and first century leaders and believers. But did that, as important as it is, justify one man as singular in position and authority in that regard? Jeff thought not—the second conclusion does not follow from the second reason.

Jeff nodded in agreement to Dr. Mill's third point. Actually, both this concern, and the sixth reason dealing with the pastor as the model for evangelism, were similar. The pastor was a key to motivation. Whether it was promoting a certain program, a need for Sunday school teachers, nursery workers, family camp, or outreach into the community, the greatest response from the congregation *always* came when it was announced from the pulpit by the pastor. Jeff had faced the same facts at BBF. But, again, was that right, or the best? How was motivation and growth for the saints to happen? What kind of environment was most conducive for spiritual growth? How does evangelism follow from church growth? The persuasion of the pulpit was real, but in Jeff's mind, hardly a reason that legitimized single-head pastors.

Dr. Mill's fourth and fifth points were similar. To many men, Jeff realized, the critical reasons why the pastorate was seen as singular in authority, was because of the function or office of preacher. If not preacher, than prophet. Either way, the historic precedent for these offices, in the Old and New Testament, justified the highest priority for the Sunday preaching, and the financial compensations necessary for that position and work.

If Jeff's deepest suspicions were true, and he was not yet sure that they were, many men in vocational ministry were reacting against multiple leadership not because they believed it to be nonbiblical or heretical, and not because they could not imagine how it could

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work—both in urban and rural churches—but because of a fear of loss of significance, and thus position, vocation, and financial support!

Jeff hesitated to even admit, in his mind, these possibilities. But, at times, he seemed forced to that conclusion. Almost all of the standard theological works on the Church for the last fifty years admitted that plurality of elders was the New Testament model for the church. Almost no current biblical scholars could marshal more than scattered and miscellaneous proof texts in defense of the single-head pastorate. And, as was evidenced by Dr. Mill's letter, almost all of the personal responses, or books on Church Growth that continued to promote the single-head pastor, resorted to experience, or observations of the biggest of American churches, or current church events overseas as proof for their conclusions. That, in Jeff's thinking, was simply inadequate to provide a biblical or theological justification for the practice. Simply because it works, or that it produces big results—even that conversions happen—is not the *first* line of argumentation for a church practice. If bigness was the measure of success, some alternative religious groups, and even cults, were beating the evangelicals at their own game!

What was Jeff to think? In private, candid moments, some of his colleagues, locally, asked him, "Jeff, if this is true, then what will become of me? What was the reason I was called of God, went to seminary, and now both desire and need a staff position in the church?" Jeff sensed the concern, and could almost *smell* the fear in those questions—they were not light matters, but questions for which the Scripture, as Jeff was discovering, had some strong and positive answers.

... are both biblical and practical reasons why we need to see the office of pastor as vital and indispensable for the survival of the Church.

I believe I answered your third question, concerning what (or who) is the pastor of the flock in the New Testament. I hope

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this letter has been a help, and I hope to be able to fellowship with you in person before many more months go by. I continue to count you as my friend as well as a valued co-laborer in the work of Christ.

Still committed to  
the Church's success!

Pastor Robert

Jeff read slowly the last paragraph from his older friend. In his own mind, he too once thought that the above reasons justified the pastoral position he loved, and wanted. Now he was not convinced. He wondered if, in the last fifty years of American Church history, Christian scholars had first *assumed* some things about the pastorate, and later, based on those unspoken assumptions, *forgotten, and then denied* the opposite conclusions without taking the time and effort to rethink the matter biblically?

Whatever the case for others, and even for Dr. Mills—who, Jeff knew, would not be convinced of alternative conclusions for the time being, regardless of the evidence—Jeff knew he was still responsible to ask the hard questions, and work toward the hard answers, that most appropriately defined the New Testament blueprint for Church leadership.

But that was for another day. A young couple was waiting outside his office for their fourth pre-marital counseling session, and Jeff eagerly welcomed them into his office, and into the continuing, God-honored, pattern of Christian ministry.

