

Section 4

Translating Theology into Practice, or How to Be Biblical Even If It Hurts

11

Transforming an Established Church

We have observed that counterfeits have always stalked the church of God—sounding fundamental but erring on matters of significance. We have seen that the true household of God finds its roots in the soil of apostolic doctrine, its structure on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Christ, on our behalf, has initiated His church. Every ministry effort and plan—organizational and credential—must answer to that foundation. The work of the Body of Christ is motivated by the mercies of Christ. Those mercies are the plan of God that has resulted in salvation by grace through faith. For those receiving Christ, they not only are now found in Christ but are joined together as members of His body. This joining, referred to as “members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6), is the spiritual reality that nurtures the growth of the church.

WHERE DO WE START?

There can be union without unity. If you were to take two

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tomcats, tie their tails together, and throw them over a clothesline, would you have union? Yes. Unity? No! So it is in the church. Today we have many denominations, organizations, and associations under the banner of Christian ministry. Yet we must be most interested in genuine unity which produces a maturing body of believers. Anything less is counterfeit. It may look good, but if it defers from the New Testament model of ministry, it is defective.

Have you ever noticed how different people react to questions? Something asking a question, a simple question, can create an unexpected response. When David simply asked, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam. 17:26), the response was swift and abusive. David was attacked in two ways. First, his motive was attacked: “Why have you come down here?....I know how conceited you are and how wicked is your heart; for you have come down only to watch the battle” (1 Sam. 17:28). Then his ministry was attacked: “With whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert?” (1 Sam. 17:28). Quite an answer for such a simple question!

Similarly, Ken has experienced the same heated reaction, sometimes nonverbal, when asking questions that focused on the need for change. Some have even said, “If you cannot agree with this, you do not belong here,” and, “Why don’t you just start another church, rather than disrupting this one?” In both cases, a sincere desire to change to a more biblical model was rejected.

At the outset it is true that change is hard. There is something inside us that resists it. But we are not simply talking about changes for novelty. We are talking about improvements for the church that bring us into closer conformity with the instructions of the New Testament, which warn us, “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6). Our desire is that the true life of the church can be reestablished in a way to produce disciples and believers who are progressing steadily in their abilities to love the Lord their God and love their neighbor as themselves.

DECISION-MAKING AND THE CHURCH

For many readers there exists a lingering but substantial question: “If the church is truly a growing body of believers, designed for maturity and cooperative support, then I can see where change is needed. But, the decisions for our church are made by the congregation, not the leadership. The buildings are owned by our denomination. Changes would disrupt those who are in control—it will never happen!”

Does that sound even somewhat familiar? It is a question we have been asked, in some form, dozens of times. There are answers and the answers are again grounded in the Scriptures:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic-speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men for among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1-7).

The increasing numbers in the growing church in Jerusalem brought new demands, and the problem was brought to the attention of the apostles.

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Our first concern is to notice the involvement of the apostles as leaders of the Jerusalem assembly. They gathered the disciples (Acts 6:2), formulated the plan (Acts 6:2-4), and ultimately sanctioned the men chosen to assist, by laying their hands on them (Acts 6:6). There is little question who is leading in the matter. The apostles were concerned and needed a proposal that allowed them to continue with their responsibilities. The selection of “the Seven” accomplished that objective.

On the other hand, notice the involvement of the congregation of disciples. Beyond the secondary issues of whether this was a select group known as “disciples” or whether it referred to the whole Jerusalem assembly, the major matter is the cooperation and participation of the group with the apostles. The problem was discussed with the congregation (Acts 6:2), and they were enlisted as participants in the solution (Acts 6:3). The plan was met with unanimous approval (Acts 6:5), and the ministries of those seven Greek brothers contributed to the spread of the church (Acts 6:7).

What principles, from this text, speak to the issue of decision-making and the church? *First, God had ordained leadership for the church.* Christ had predicted that His church would be built upon Peter (Matt. 16:16-18) and the apostle (Matt. 18:15-20; 19:28). As the book of Acts develops, the apostles and elders join in cooperative leadership efforts (14:23; 15:2, 4, 22). By the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, as he begins his trip to Rome, the affairs of the churches are left in the care of the elders (20:17, 32-38). The ministry of the apostles and elders provided the shepherding leadership necessary for the growth of the New Testament church.

That fact is repeated. In words similar to the counsel given by Paul at Ephesus, Peter reminds the undershepherds of the churches that they are to “be shepherds of God’s flock under you care” (1 Pet. 5:2). The author to the Hebrews reminds the brothers that they are to “obey your leaders and submit to their authority” (Heb. 13:17). Leadership and authority in the assembly is given to those who are called elders and overseers—men who shepherd the church.

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Second, in Acts 6 God had also ordained congregations who participate in the life and needs of the church. The congregation of disciples enthusiastically cooperated with the twelve in solving the needs of the Grecian widows. Even so, a church is functioning properly when both the leadership and congregation cooperate in ministering to the needs of those around them (cf. Acts 15:2, 4, 22).

There is a parallel in the home. The head of a woman is man (1 Cor. 11:3). As the ones ultimately accountable for the nurture and growth of our families, we recognize our responsibility to lead our families in matters of spiritual growth. But we would be “full of folly” if we ignored the insights and needs of our wives. Our designated place as head is in no way a club of superiority. We are rather to recognize the equal spiritual status of our wives and live with them in a skillful manner so that our own spiritual growth can continue (1 Pet. 3:7). In a similar manner in the church, elders are to provide the kind of leadership that holds members of the body up as worthy and equal brothers in the assembly and that facilitates direction and ministry that brings corporate growth.

Third, a careful balance of loving leadership and cooperating congregations produces a growing church. There can be imbalances toward elder rule or toward congregational rule. Neither group is to use its position (elders or overseers) or its valued approval (congregation) in power struggles. The New Testament church grew and prospered because the leadership, like a husband, understood its responsibility under God to lead, and the congregation, like a wife, understood its responsibility under God to follow in an enthusiastic and participatory fashion.

Finally, unless we employ the authority of apostles today, which we cannot defend from the New Testament, the authority of any organization over the autonomy of a local assembly is indefensible. Denominations, associations, sessions, conferences, or parachurch agencies all must recognize that they exist strictly for serving the church, not overseeing it. If the authority of the apostles was trans-

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ferred anywhere in the New Testament, it was transferred to the Scriptures themselves (2 Pet. 3:14-18). All too quickly denominations, organizations, or associations begin to make decisions according to vested interests rather than according to biblical criteria. If that is happening, history will record the demise of that group.

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSITION FOR THE CHURCH

We see the need for cooperation in a spirit of approval and obedience, and understanding that the spiritual leadership of the church is responsible “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (Eph. 4:12). Now four principles of transition are necessary for accomplishing unity and maturity in the Body.

First, the church is a flock, not a herd. The apostles repeatedly referred to believers as sheep. The flock, as a group, needs encouragement and direction, protection, and feeding. Like the Good Shepherd, who becomes the model for shepherding, intimacy develops in relationships—a trust and affection born out of time spent together (John 10). A herd is driven; a flock is led. Believers who form the Body of Christ need to be cared for in matters of life and spiritual growth.

Second, the church is led by shepherds, not ranchers. Some modern church-growth theorists see the pastor as the rancher who oversees his sprawling spread and keeps count of this herd. He cares for basic needs but is certainly above the specific problems and concerns of his herd. But leadership in the church is done by shepherds—men who are pastors more than prodders. They are ones-among rather than ones-over. They are brothers in the assembly, which ultimately has only one Master (Matt. 23:8-12).

Third, the church offers pastoral services, not preaching stations. In most church circles, the decision to have multiple Sunday services is received with joy. But we suspect the enthusiasm is premature. The work of the ministry is knowing and leading the flock—encouraging cooperation and relationships through leadership modeling. If a

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church grows numerically to the point of needing larger facilities or outgrowing its effectiveness for ministry on a relational basis, then the proper response is real church growth—planting daughter works in a spirit of evangelism and mission—rather than cultivating enormous preaching stations.

Fourth, the church is to encourage community, not commuters. The twentieth century is an age of mobility. We are able to travel quickly from place to place with very few physical limitations. But this commuting mentality has hurt the church. Whether the reasons for believers traveling out of their community on Sunday morning relate to a popular preacher or an appealing education program, the disadvantages become quickly apparent. Significant travel time, less contact with neighbors, and an inability to coordinate church ministry and evangelistic efforts within the community all contribute to the loss of a sense of community. Needless to say, it is impossible to “love my neighbor as myself” if I only wave to him as I drive by! In the New Testament church believers and leaders intimately knew each other. They got together more than just during times of preaching and crisis counseling. They learned how to love the Lord together and love each other as an expression of worship. They taught each other and admonished each other, remembering that the goal was maturity and that each member of the body was necessary for accomplishing the end.

On the other hand, if a local church offers the ministries that you determine are biblical and necessary, then relocation to the community where the believers live and the meetings are conducted seems reasonable and prudent.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

To the extent that our churches may deviate from the New Testament model, we need the courage to face the question, “What can we do?” For some churches the change may be made with small

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corrections. For others it may mean the possible loss of buildings and facilities or the severance from an association that refuses to cooperate with the necessary changes.

To be realistic, most churches need more than a week of meetings and a revised constitution; the changes go much deeper than that. For most assemblies caught in traditions that cannot be defended biblically, a minimum of four years is needed to accomplish the changes of direction necessary to bring them in line with the New Testament model. The following steps provide a general blueprint which, of course, should be modified to the needs and situations of any given assembly.

PHASE ONE: CHECKING THE BLUEPRINTS

There is no motivation that can compare to doctrinal motivation. Thus, the first step for a church is evaluation and study. Evaluation allows for the expectations and needs within the church to be known, along with understanding the past contributions of the assembly. The process of study allows a church to develop a strategy for a biblical philosophy of the church. Based on the facts determined by evaluation, the extent of change necessary can be determined.

At the outset, it is worth remembering that the Bereans were highly commended in the New Testament for the following reasons:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thesalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11).

Can you imagine listening to the apostle Paul and yet reserving an opinion until you have had the time to study the issues? That is a great precedent for the right and need of any assembly to evaluate

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and study the issues that bring conformity to godliness. Receiving the Word with enthusiasm and pursuing personal study that produces individual conviction is the best way to ensure openness to change.

Step A: Evaluation of the Church

The initial task is to understand the biblical imperatives given to the church so that the body can properly function. These imperatives and practices of the first-century church are used to evaluate the twentieth-century church. This process lasts about half a year and should include the following activities:

- Selection of an evaluation team
- Study and research
 - study of the biblical imperatives given to the church
 - exposure to biblically functioning churches
- Evaluation of the church's present philosophy and methodology
- Evaluation of the membership's perception of the ministry

Step B: Strategy for the Church

Based on the study of the biblical directives and practices, the evaluation team establishes the biblical philosophy for the church. A strategy for the implementation of that philosophy is determined (including Steps C-E) and developed. Certain activities should be performed during a six-month period:

- Development of a biblical philosophy of the church
- Development of a corresponding biblical methodology of the church
- Development of a strategy for change

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- study the extent of needed for change
- determine what changes must be made
- study the impact of the changes
- determine how the changes can best be made

PHASE TWO: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

During the second year, the church will begin to define different elements of a body of believers. These include biblical guidelines for leadership and the instruction and study necessary for directing ministry efforts.

Concerning leadership, a church may come to the conclusion that there are presently no men qualified according to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to serve as leaders in the church. That is not an insurmountable obstacle. The pattern in Antioch was, first, conversion and then later the appointment of elders (Acts 14:21-23). The time needed to develop leadership is a clear example of the fact that a church cannot fully function instantly.

If a church decides to consider bringing in leadership on the basis of recommendation or educational background, it should recognize that the basic principles of testing before serving would be strained (cf. 1 Tim. 3:10). That man should be considered temporary for at least a year, so that a relationship with the body can be established. Then either a more permanent commitment or satisfactory relocation arrangements can be made. Remembering that both the apostles and their official representatives (such as Timothy and Titus) served in unique and itinerant ministries (2 Tim. 1:6; Titus 1:5), we recommend that the practice of importing outside shepherds to a flock should not be encouraged by an assembly.

Step C: Leadership Development

This period is considered an interim time. Questions of future leadership for the church are under initial consideration. Prefer-

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ably current staff are sympathetic to the New Testament model and working towards similar goals. During these two years, the church body begins to see the work of Christian ministry more in terms of relationships and lives than a professional program conducted once a week.

Small group gatherings, following the pattern of the house churches in the New Testament, are to be considered an asset to the church. In these contexts believers can minister as individuals to other individuals in family and community contexts. The process of rethinking leadership and organization and meetings for the body is vital for transforming a church. There are methods a body can employ to accomplish their goal:

- Implementation of the biblical strategy
- Selection of potential leadership
 - manifestation of developing maturity
 - evidence of abilities for leadership
- Special teaching for potential leaders
 - instructional program during adult Sunday school
 - small group involvement on regular basis

PHASE THREE: DEVELOPING BIBLICAL ROOTS

Now the church is ready to begin to develop direction based on its study and experiences. Presuming that a number of men, qualified to lead, have surfaced and been recognized during this initial two years, each man is given a group of believers to oversee; this will become his shepherding group. These families and individual believers should be somewhat geographically near to one other and to him. The size of our homes naturally limits the size of the groups. We have found that an elder has a reasonably full ministry load with ten to twelve families and/or individuals from the body. As ministries

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develop and needs become known, we have found it is difficult for a man to handle many more. Of course, these shepherding groups are responsibilities that are additional to a man's vocation and family. If all elders are equal, and all are to shepherd the needs of the flock, it seems consistent that all have a shepherding group. This group becomes a prime support and encouragement for men in the ministry.

During this year the existing church body is divided into smaller groups for regular home meetings of study and fellowship. That is best accomplished with two guidelines: regularity of meeting and geographic distribution. Believers cannot know one another unless they meet together regularly in a context conducive to developing relationships. This is done with a recognition of community identity when the group members live relatively close and meet in one another's home.

In the corporate church meeting, then, believers come together to praise the Lord for the growth in their individual lives and home meetings. They devote themselves to the New Testament priorities of the Word, the body of believers in fellowship, and prayer. Christian education is considered a primary responsibility of the parents, though the whole body of adult believers is responsible to minister to the children of the church as an extended family.

One small group program had gone from thirty-three groups to eighteen in less than a year and a half. This was the situation Ken faced when asked to come and "fix" a small-group Bible study program in a large church. It was a typical case study on how not to begin a program. Leaders had been selected and given a short course in discussion techniques, group dynamics, and Bible study. Then with fanfare and a festive sign-up evening, everyone in the church was encouraged to join the program that would provide what had been missing in the congregation—fellowship. The response was good—the results was tragic. Expectations were not fulfilled; leaders and participants became disillusioned and frustrated. When

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the smoke had cleared, almost half the groups no longer existed.

The mentality that demands everything be done instantaneously permeates the church to the extent that small groups have no chance to get off the ground. And church leaders—particularly those who stand in pulpits—say, “See, those small groups don’t work!” No, they don’t—if leadership is not developed and if the church does not understand the implications of, first, the responsibility of elders as pastor-teachers and, second, the responsibility of the church, under the elders, to function as a body. The transition of the local church to its proper role is crucial. Step C begins the process of developing the leadership; Step D provides the small group environment.

Step D: Shepherd Group Establishment

Step D focuses on the establishment of an ongoing program of the church in which the church is segmented by zones to eventually create an environment for mutual, reciprocal ministries under the leadership of elders. This vital one-year plan includes the following:

- Establishment of shepherding groups
 - city is segmented into areas, or zones, that are assigned to individuals within that zone
 - initially two-three pilot groups are established; later the entire church is involved in a progressive manner
 - these groups are to continue indefinitely as they are incorporated into Step E

- Responsibility of shepherding group leadership
 - to begin to develop the leadership-flock relationships
 - to coordinate regular home meetings for study and fellowship
 - to provide pastoral ministry to the needs of his group
 - to begin to take part in management and ministry with church leadership

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PHASE FOUR: DEVELOPING BIBLICAL FRUIT

As believers in the church begin to become known by the leadership of the church, they can be better encouraged in matters of discipleship and obedience to the commands of the Lord. From these men and women, leaders can be developed for the growing needs of the body. Shepherding groups are now established, and their numbers are growing. Elders from those groups are meeting together regularly for providing direction and oversight for the church.

Spiritual growth usually will produce numerical growth. What then? The answer is seen simply in the planting of daughter works in adjoining communities and in the preparation of sending leadership teams as missionaries to areas and cultures beyond the contacts of the community of the local church. The solution is not building bigger buildings.

How large is too large? We really do not know, but we have seen that as the assembly numbers in the multiple hundreds the challenges of knowing the flock, and ministering to it in a manageable fashion, becomes increasingly more difficult. The judgment of size is to be left up to each assembly, which has the same New Testament mandates to consider that we all do.

May we voice some cautions? First of all, we should be careful in citing the 3,000 of Acts 2. Not only was that a unique time of temporary residence associated with Pentecost, but the text carefully emphasizes that home meetings were held in conjunction with Temple meetings. Any kind of ministry that neglects or de-emphasizes the centrality of home or small group meetings is attempting something that is unrealistic for the church.

Second, the sheer numbers of multiple hundreds, if not thousands, of believers in an assembly demands both large buildings and elder boards that threaten to undo a church financially and logistically. We need to be extremely careful that we do not borrow the world's measuring stick of success here.

Step E: Establishing the Church According to the New Testament Model

This last step allows for the final basic remodeling of the church according to the New Testament guidelines to better accomplish the ministry mandates. Sufficient flexibility of staff, leadership, and ministry matters still exist to provide for the desires and insights of an assembly. No matter how strong and mature a body becomes, it cannot neglect certain matters:

- Final decisions are made concerning staff responsibilities and board of elders for the assembly. From this group could also come deacons and faithful men as well as women who begin to assume regular staff responsibilities to other women in the church.
- Shepherding groups are established under the leadership of the elders, while encouraging mutual ministries between believers.
- Necessary adjustments to the corporate meeting format and Christian education programs are made to come more closely in conformity to the New Testament model.

CONCLUSIONS

Talking to a brother about some of these principles of transition, with a format spread over a few years of church study and corporate commitment led to the following response. He just smiled and said, “Our church has undergone two splits in the last five years. Both of the fights have come over important matters: the first was over a name change, and the second was concerning Sunday school curriculum!” If that kind of observation were not typical, it might be humorous. But the fact is that churches do not historically change easily. The changes come in the context of a struggle that has caused believers

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to rethink the character and conduct of their church body. In more rare cases, churches have been encouraged in these changes by the mature and gentle teaching of resident pastoral staff.

Whatever the circumstances, and whatever the factors, modern theorists have never been able to improve on the New Testament model. It never becomes outdated. It never is in danger of obsolescence. It always has two supports that guarantee success:

*I will build my church, and the gates of Hades
will not overcome it (Matt. 16:18).*

*For no one can lay any foundation other than
the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11).*