

## Section 1

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



# 1

## The Traditional Setting



BELIEVERS BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Jeff Curtis, Pastor

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Dear Pastor Mills,

Greetings from the cold southland! I still remember our good times of sharing and encouragement at the last pastors' conference. Yet I think I came away with more questions than answers! I think that is good (eventually!), but I need to get your thoughts in some important areas.

As you know, our church has grown significantly in the last year, and we are now faced with a series of ministry questions. They include:

1. How does a church pursue intimacy in relationships more than simply promoting a religious program?
2. What is the relationship of my philosophy of ministry to the building of a church?

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3. How should the church view the senior pastor in relation to the other staff members? How are they both equal and yet distinct in ministry and service?
4. What are some practical suggestions for encouraging our membership in the exercise of their gifts and abilities?
5. How can I, as a pastor, fulfill my shepherding responsibilities and still be the husband and father God wants me to be?
6. How can we encourage our parents in the assembly to take an increasingly greater responsibility in the raising of their children?

I suppose I should find a seventh to make it a perfect set of questions! Even so, you can see that we are at a crossroads in ministry (and I, in life!), and we need some good biblical counsel. From my days in the community college until now, I have always valued your friendship and insights. I am again needy of that, because I want to build from a biblical blueprint.

I am looking forward to your soon reply on these important matters.

Cordially,

Jeff

—PROCLAIMING CHRIST IN OUR DAY—

Robert subconsciously flipped the corner of the letter as he again reads of the concerns of his young friend and colleague. He thought back to the beginning of their friendship. It had been nine years earlier. He was in his second church at the time—now he was in his fourth—and Jeff had begun attending church while enrolled

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at the local community college. He remembered Jeff even then as a sincere, sober-minded young man who, even at a young age, was committed to full-time Christian service. He had taken Jeff under his *ministry wing* and given him an idea of typical experiences and questions that face a pastor in an urban American ministry. Jeff had gone on to a four-year college and seminary. He was currently in a Southern city in his first pastorate.

Yet even as Robert reread the letter one phrase kept jumping out at him. It was, “I want to build from a biblical blueprint.” A biblical blueprint? What did that mean? Robert’s mind raced back to the beginning of his ministry experiences in his first church—days full of encouragement and joy—meetings that began in a rented community center. Then the church had built its first building, started a Christian day school, and was currently, according to the latest report given him, trying to purchase property for a new educational and ministry complex.

A biblical blueprint? What did that mean? Robert thought of his present responsibilities. He was now the senior pastor of a large church. Current membership: more than 800. Current staff: four full-time, and four part-time. Current preaching responsibilities: two morning services, one evening service, one Monday Bible class, one Wednesday evening prayer meeting, one Thursday evening couples Bible study, and an occasional weekend ministry in nearby churches.

He was currently vice-chairman of the state committee for administration within his local denomination. Every spring he served as adjunct professor for a week at his denomination’s West Coast seminary, and he was now beginning to do some biblical research on a book on church growth.

He thought about his family. His dear wife was one special woman. It seems she was always the steady and gracious one in his life. She seemed to handle with ease the large demands of this family—two teenagers and two grade school twins—his ministry, and the expectations of the church for social and ministry responsibilities.

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Actually, in some ways her job was harder than his, because he was gone from home a minimum of three to four evenings a week. He wondered if he was spending enough time with his kids, but they understood how the work of the Lord was his priority. Even that thought unsettled him, but he could not put his finger on what it was that bothered him.

A biblical blueprint? Actually, the questions raised in Jeff's letter were almost precisely the ones facing him as well. His congregation had grown to about 80-percent of the capacity of the facilities. It seemed time now to build in order to provide a building that allowed for growth. Or, of course, he could begin having three Sunday morning services. He also needed to add more staff and was currently considering greater involvement and ministry through a local radio station.

But he was running out of hours in a day. There were so many opportunities, yet too little and too few available workers. He smiled. In another fifteen years Jeff may find himself in a different yet similar ministry situation, facing the same questions of ministry and—a biblical blueprint.

Yet the more Robert thought, the more disturbed he became. More questions raced into his mind. Was it right that the pastor (or his wife) was expected at every church function? What about Paul's concern for a pastor to "manage his own household well . . . but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" (1 Tim. 3:4-5). What was the relationship of effective preaching to the increasing number of people who were coming to his church on Sunday mornings? He had always assumed that numerical growth was the measure of ministry success. Is that true? Is that biblical?

What about parental involvement in the training of their children? Many of the families in the church sent their children not only to Sunday school but also to private Christian day schools. Did that at some point, do more harm than good? Did the fathers of those families still see themselves as the primary teachers of their children

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and wives? That same typical family, if it attended all the available church meetings during the week (which he regularly encouraged) would be exposed to twelve to fifteen different and separate instructions weekly. What did that do to the family units in his church? Did that leave the family members enough time together? Did it allow for opportunities to develop relationships in their communities?

Robert almost regretted getting the letter from his friend. He had not thought of some of those questions since his seminary days. The nature of the church, the reality of genuine spirituality, the ministry model of Christ Himself, proper conduct in the weekly meetings, leadership development, clergy and layman responsibilities, the place of women in the church, spiritual gifts, biblical education and family involvement—these matters all related to Jeff’s letter. He realized that he needed to spend some time seriously re-evaluating Jeff’s questions in order to understand a biblical blueprint for himself.

Within twenty-four hours Robert found himself alone at the coast in a beach cabin. He was able to shift some ministry responsibilities, cancel some others, and after a quick trip home to pull the dozen or so books in his library that related to his questions, he had slipped away to a cabin owned by a church family. His intent was to spend a few days in private study and prayer. From that, he hoped to be able not only to answer Jeff’s letter to his satisfaction but also to begin to formulate that *biblical blueprint* that he found himself now needing. Who knew—maybe it would lead to his first book!

Robert laid out the books he had brought from home. It seemed wise to pursue first what other men had written on the nature and philosophy (he wondered if the word “theology” would be better) of Christian ministry. He quickly discovered that most of the current books addressed the same basic subjects. These included:

- The purpose of the church
- The function and ministry of the church
- Qualifications and responsibilities of leaders in the church

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- Classification and types of church leaders
- Spiritual gifts in the church
- Small group involvement in the church

Yet even that list bothered him a bit. He found very little, if anything, that attempted to align the nature of the spiritual life to church ministry. There was little help in the area of the relationships of leaders to the individual, family, and corporate lives of the assembly. He determined to work on those areas as well.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH?**

Robert reviewed the materials spread out on the dining room table—as he mentally reviewed what he had been taught in seminary.

“The purpose of the church is to glorify God.” The words stared back at him in a cold and lifeless way. What did that mean? He looked at the cross reference given (Eph. 1:5-6, 12):

*He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves...in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

That made more sense. All that we have in God, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is ultimately to climax in our recognition and worship of Him.

As Robert reviewed books printed more recently on the subject, he found the stated purpose of the church also to be “evangelism and edification.” He was hard-pressed to find a verse that *specifically* said that, but a number of verses, particularly in Acts, demonstrated



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the principle of spiritual and numerical growth in the spreading of the gospel. Even so, those dual purposes seemed right to him.

Yet books on philosophy of ministry and church growth varied significantly when it came to suggesting how those purposes are practically worked out in church ministry. Was the function of the church to gather to learn? Was it a training ground for ministry? Robert thought it should go further—that the church should be a place to minister, not just a training ground for ministry.

And what about spiritual gifts? It seemed there were as many opinions about spiritual gifts as there were numbers of spiritual gifts. How does a person discover his gift or gifts. What is the difference between natural ability and God-given ability? How does ministry responsibility relate to ministry giftedness? Do all pastors have a gift of teaching or preaching? He wondered about some teachers he had listened to in the past—even himself! At least two recent Christian authors had suggested that church leaders did not need spiritual gifts in order to minister. He did not understand that.

What about the gift of ruling, or management? He was not sure about himself, but he knew 1 Timothy 3:4-5 required that ability of all leaders in their homes. Yet 1 Timothy 5:17 suggested levels of management ability or activity, and proportional compensation accordingly. Robert decided management must be a ministry gift that deserved high priority.

### **WHAT IS THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF LEADERS IN THE CHURCH?**

Pastor Mills loved to read the latest articles and books on church leadership. In them he found guidelines for helping him in his church, as well as creative thoughts for his staff. As the senior pastor, he felt a personal responsibility to be well read in this area.

Robert's role in the church was clearly defined by the church constitution. He was the senior pastor. There was one associate pastor, one assistant pastor, and a full-time youth pastor. In deci-

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sion-making, the staff pastors were to seek a consensus that, when approved by the senior pastor, was regularly taken to the congregation for vote or approval. This description made Robert feel a little like a corporate president responsible ultimately to the stockholders or employees. He liked that feeling, but he knew this was not *exactly* the New Testament description of decision-making. He could not even find the specific mention of a *trustee board* in the New Testament.

Robert remembered being challenged once in seminary by a fellow student (sometimes they asked harder questions than the professors) concerning a church constitution. Beyond the minimum document that any state requires of a church (or any non-profit corporation), what, this student asked, was the value of a constitution? Could it possibly foster an attitude of dependence on it more than study and dependence on the Scriptures? Robert has heard of churches whose expressed intent was to avoid constitutions and doctrinal statements in order to encourage their people to personal Bible study in unclear areas. Robert wondered if this was wise or whether it would *really* work.

The Scriptures speak of the pastor as a shepherd. This imagery was a picture Robert loved so well, yet at times he felt more like a cowboy than a shepherd—doing less leading and more driving. He wondered if Peter would refer to Christ as the “Chief Rancher” if 1 Peter 5:1-4 were rewritten for today. That thought sidetracked him, and he took a break to make a new pot of coffee before returning to his study.

A shepherd is one who knows his sheep. That thought made Robert a little uncomfortable. *Knowing* means different things, of course, but he did not know the names of all his members, much less their needs or life intentions. Pastoral counseling was most often crisis counseling. He had wondered a thousand times about how much less complicated some Christians’ problems might have been if someone with a pastoral concern could have started helping out at the beginning of a problem rather than at the end of it.

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Robert had become more curious in the last year about the subject of multiple leadership, or plurality of elders. He had done some reading on it for two reasons. First, one of the deacons in his church kept giving him articles and books to read on the subject. He suspected this would be a topic for one of the next church leadership retreats.

Second, he was curious about this “elder rule” system because it was becoming an emotionally-charged subject at various leadership meetings of his denomination. Professors at his old seminary, pastors and colleagues, and individual believers were asking increasingly difficult questions about it. Robert had voiced public concern over the ways congregations and committees seemed to be “taking sides” on the issue. Even if he wanted to change the leadership and decision-making structure of his church, Robert could not imagine how that would be accomplished.

Finally, Robert noticed a large variety of opinions on philosophy of ministry. Some men advocated the need for the local church to provide every ministry need and experience—from the regular preaching and teaching ministry of Christian schools for the child; from day care to undergraduate and graduate-level training. These men also saw only limited value in mission boards and para-church organizations. Other men recommended a commitment to cooperation among the Christian churches and organizations planning similar ministry efforts in a similar area. From Robert’s experience, the relationship between cooperation and Christian ministry sometimes better resembled the mix of oil and water. He wondered what the apostle Paul would suggest, in light of Philippians 1:15-18. But then, that was a biblical issue. He needed to stay *practical* so he could handle these questions for Jeff, and for himself.

### **WHAT IS THE PLACE AND MINISTRY OF BELIEVERS IN THE CHURCH?**

Robert started by thinking about believers in his church. They

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include men and women from all kinds of occupations: bakers, plumbers, builders, pilots, teachers, secretaries. What was their place in the Body? If we found their place based on their skills, we would relate to them at the level of their physical abilities or trades. Robert had always understood them to be laymen—that is, believers in the church who are vocationally employed in professions other than the ministry. But that seemed an odd distinction, as if the work of the Lord were separated from the normal work and occupations of a believer. Yet the real ministers, Robert knew, were the full-time pastors and Christian workers. He suspected that that tradition was not biblically based, but then there does have to be some distinction between the clergy and the layman, right?

What's in a name? Reverend. Father. Pastor. Preacher. Doctor. (Robert said the last word slowly. After all, he had stayed in seminary for the purpose of being fully prepared for the ministry, and he was proud that he could display his doctoral degree on the wall of his church office.) Chaplain. Missionary. Minister. (There was that word again!) Too often, it seemed to Robert, we are known principally by our titles and jobs-of-distinction.

Robert mentally reviewed the instructions of Christ in Matthew 23, which stood as a warning against titles of distinction, in contrast to hearts committed to servanthood. Further, he remembered the end of that paragraph, which said:

*The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matt. 23:11-12).*

Does that apply to the typical approach of clergy and layman distinctions? Does that allow for distinctions based on “full-time” or layman classifications?

What about the gifted and valued contributions of each member of the body? Robert readily admitted to himself that the church ministry had become rather professional in the last ten to fifteen years.

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When a staff need exists, a personnel search is made for the most capable candidate—usually one who is a stranger to the congregation in need. Very rarely had Robert seen, or heard of, a believer who had been proved in his own congregation and prepared for a place of service to the assembly. That certainly seemed to be the pattern of Acts 6, as well as the recommendation of 1 Timothy 3:1. But it was hard to imagine its actually happening in the church.

What about foreign missions in the church? The usual practice was for a missionary candidate to travel around and gather support from many churches before he or she would leave for the field. Yet most of the missionaries that Robert's church supported were virtual strangers to the congregation, particularly to the newer members. The proving process for these candidates rarely involved an extended stay at any one congregation. Robert wondered about that in light of Paul and Barnabas and their relationship to the church at Antioch.

The inquiring seminary student also had once asked him about the “theological justification” for boarding schools for missionaries' children—schools that separated the children from their parents. Admittedly, it did seem to go against the pattern of the home's being a proving ground for ministry qualifications, but it all seemed in the most worthwhile of causes, inasmuch as the parents were ministering in the cause of Christ. Jim, his fellow student, had wondered if there might be a workable alternative, one that would also comply with the biblical concerns. Robert decided to study that more later.

Related to Robert's thoughts on professionalism and the ministry was a cross reference he noticed in one of the books he was reading. It was 1 Corinthians 14:26. That text suggested that in the New Testament church there was a regular commitment to an “open” meeting—that believers came to those meetings ready to participate in the edification and encouragement of the saints. Apart from the aspect of the question that related to tongues-speaking and prophecy, Robert wondered how such a principle could be incorporated into an audience of 400. He admitted (again to himself) that most believers come to the Sunday meeting ready to “be ministered to.” There

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were few opportunities, if any, to minister to the gathered church in an open fashion. The logistics and possible problems of changing to a mutual edification style of meeting make Robert shudder.

Robert glanced outside and noticed that it was dark. In his interest and concern over these ministry questions, he had gone right past both lunch and dinner. Yet Robert believed he now had the beginnings of some answers that would aid Jeff in his current situation—and would then begin to answer his own similar, unsettling questions.

But the letter would have to wait until tomorrow. Right now he was most interested in finding a hamburger.