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Typical Solutions to Traditional Problems

— RALEIGH HILLS BIBLE CHURCH —

Dr. Robert Mills, Senior Pastor

February 23

Dear Brother Jeff,

It does not seem like two months have already passed since we last fellowshiped together at the pastors' conference. It was good to get your letter, which updated me on happenings at your church. It was also hard getting your letter! I thought I taught you never to ask questions that I had trouble answering! Seriously, your letter prompted some "soul searching" on my part, a brief study on some of the questions you raised, and now hopefully some fresh answers from a "biblical blueprint."

I would like to answer some of your questions in the order that I studied them. I hope this provides a context in which we can continue to dialogue the issues together.

First, I appreciated very much your questions on a philosophy, or theology, of ministry. It seems to me that the overall

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purpose of the church is to glorify Christ. He is the Head of the church—and the focus and goal as well.

Even as He is the Head, we are given the “day to day” responsibilities, as pastor, of managing His people. Therefore, it would seem to me that the church should be, before the world, a picture of the excellence of our Lord. To me, that means that both our programs and facilities for ministry should be first class! I suppose the model and instructions concerning the Tabernacle in the Exodus could serve as an example. God is a God of excellence, and we should be a reflection of Him.

I share your concerns and questions regarding program and staff development. I remember your sharing with me the quality of some of the young men and the women in your church, and what able leaders you think they will someday make. But what if they do not have the professional skills of someone outside the church? Should the church suffer because of some “in-house” principle? I think not. Rather . . .

Jeff’s mind drifted from the letter in his hands to the lives of some of the brothers and sisters in his church. A small twinge of disappointment slipped past his heart. He thought of two of the young men—men who desired greater responsibility in the church. They were full of enthusiasm for the labor of the ministry. They also were full of questions. Did God want them to stay in this city, develop an occupation or trade, and continue to minister in the church? Or was it better to leave the church and go to the seminary for training, with the hope of sometime being relocated in this or another church that needed their ministry skills?

Jeff was not sure why he felt disappointed. Maybe it was just that he had come to love those men, and he would miss their presence and fellowship. It did seem right to get the best possible training for the ministry. But what would happen in the meantime? Could the church afford to wait for those men to return? Would staff need to be chosen from another area?

Jeff had recently taught through the book of Acts, and a phrase

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of Acts 6 continued to drift through his mind: “Choose seven men from among you who are known” (6:3). Coupled with this thought was the still-fresh experience of a sister church in the community. The members had brought in a pastor after a long weekend of examination and prayer. As it turned out, the church did not realize that this man had serious marital and business problems. The whole situation had ended in a community scandal of immorality and embezzlement. Jeff had tried to help in the healing process of some of the church members. But some of the believers, now six months later, had still not recovered spiritually.

Jeff supposed that the church deserved the most skilled pastors available. Yet he still had serious questions about this attitude of “professionalism and excellence.” He enjoyed the meetings in his church that were handled with skill. Nevertheless, there was a sense of informality and personal commitment in the church in Acts that he had seen repeatedly in his study. For example, a principle and regular focus of the New Testament church was the proclamation of Christ around the Lord’s Table (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). The practice in his church, and in the churches he was most familiar with, placed the Table at the end of the morning service, usually on a monthly basis. Somehow it seemed the practice came short of the New Testament model—particularly with the habits of “clock-watching” that that practice encouraged.

Should the world be impressed with the church? Should church buildings be community illustrations of “excellence”? Should that signal to the unbeliever that God is “alive and well” among them? Jeff had enjoyed the words of Christ in Matthew 22. As an essential summary of the whole Old Testament, Christ had reminded His critics that to “love your neighbor as yourself” (22:39) was the second commandment, and like the first. “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (22:40). That taught that the essentials of the saint’s life-style were a commitment to love—first, to loving the Lord, and second, to loving those around us. How did

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that fit with the witness of brick and mortar? Could buildings of flesh and blood do better? It would be nice if it were biblically so. Jeff imagined that it would be economically so.

The thought of credibility raced through Jeff's mind. To both the believing and unbelieving community, a church has credentials in two basic ways: first, by its building or facilities, and second, by the pastor. Jeff thought back to an embarrassing conversation of the preceding week. He had been considering the nature of the Body of Christ, with particular interest in the fact of Christ as Head. A visitor came into the church (building) and introduced himself, and then said, "Well, pastor, tell me about *your* church." With not the slightest intent of embarrassing his quest, Jeff had replied, "Oh, you mean *Christ's* church!" The visitor quickly amended his questions, but the conversation ended in both men being embarrassed by the conversation.

Jeff had not intended that; he had just voiced what had been his concern of study recently. He still thought he was *right* in what he said, but he regretted the embarrassment of the moment. Jeff thought of Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders: "Be shepherds of the Church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28b). The church certainly did not belong to any man, or pastor. It belonged to Christ, who was its Head.

it seems that God's people deserve the best that we can offer in clergy and ministry-skills.

Second, and related to the first, you asked concerning the development of the gifts and abilities of believers in your church. I have some exciting news for you! I just recently discovered a Spiritual Gifts Inventory Questionnaire (SGIQ) that takes a layman through a series of questions which guarantees him the discovery of at least one of his spiritual gifts! Can you imagine how . . .

For a second time in the reading of the letter from his friend and

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mentor, Jeff's heart slipped a notch in disappointment. He had hoped that Dr. Mills would do better on this question. He remembered one extended conversation they had had at the pastors' conference. It was Jeff's growing suspicion that the questions of spiritual gifts had been seriously mistaken in current ministry terms. Indeed, there were multiple opportunities for seminars, questionnaires, and books on "how to discover and use your spiritual gift(s)." But the New Testament perspective seemed to be not so much the discovering of one's spiritual gift(s) as the proper use of one's gift(s). There were no easy discovery formulas in Jeff's study of the question in the New Testament. He suspected the apostle Paul would have been more than a little bit amused at the current state of the church in relation to spiritual gifts. Yet if the essential New Testament instructions were pointed more to proper use than discovery, how did that work in the church? Were there contexts in which the gifts and ministries could be developed? Could a greater emphasis on small group and regular home meeting help here? Jeff suspected he had little remaining interest for the SGIQ.

how much a church can be benefited if it mobilizes its laity with each member knowing and using his or her gift!

Third, in the area of leadership, I am going to confide some things to you that need to stay confidential until I have time to work them through with my staff and church (which could be years). I need to share these things with you, but they must not go beyond you.

I think our church is not working from a proper enough "biblical blueprint" currently in matters of leadership and decision-making. As you might remember, we have a deacon board, a trustee board, and ultimately congregational approval of major program changes and financial expenditures. That pattern has worked relatively well, and it certainly seems to fit the "democratic" model within America.

But I am suspicious that we could do better! I would like to move more to a system of having an elder board, a deacon board, and some kind of congregational involvement in the decision-mak-

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ing without seeing them as the ultimate authority in the church. This has implications for how we see our church constitution, the future of my denomination, and even the relationship between our churches and our Bible schools and seminaries!

I would like to see the church staff as elders in the body. I would still need to be the “senior pastor” (or whatever we decide to call it!) since the church still needs someone who is in charge, and who provides direction for the church. But I would like more of a team spirit! I think this will make my staff feel more like part of the team. It seems that . . .

Jeff gripped the pages of the letter with excitement. He had no idea his former pastor was considering those concepts. He was greatly encouraged. He knew it would take courage for Robert to pursue that line of thinking within his denomination. But that was almost exactly where Jeff had come in his own study.

It was readily apparent to Jeff that the New Testament church leaders were called overseers, or elders. They were together able to shepherd and guard the flock of God. It seemed to Jeff that a few strategic New Testament passages affirmed the plurality of this leadership team in a singular church context—that is, a plurality of elders in each local assembly. Jeff had not seen or heard of much concerning that concept, but he was committed to seeing it become a working reality in his church.

Even so, many questions remained in Jeff’s mind. What was his place of distinction in the church? Was that even a proper consideration? Christ seemingly distinguished Peter in relation to the twelve, but he also instructed the whole group carefully in matters of servanthood and humility. How did that all fit together?

What were the implications of those things for the financial support needed for one who served in full-time ministry (actually, Jeff had tried to begin using the phrase *vocational ministry*, since it seemed to him that all Christians were “full time”). Jeff understood, like Robert, that he still needed to provide the leadership for the

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elder team. All groups look for, and need, a leader—or so he had always been taught. But would the elders be distinguished by their educational degrees? By their skill in ministry? By their ministry tasks? And, if so, who would make the decisions that provided those distinctions and the appropriate financial compensations? It certainly was true that Jeff was coming up with more questions than answers these days.

Further, what was the congregation's role in decision making? Although Robert's church had "congregational rule," Jeff's had been established along lines of "elder rule." At times it seemed that both were extremes of what the New Testament recommended. Congregational rule seemed to allow for church members' taking authority that superseded the biblical model. Yet Jeff had to admit that in his "elder rule" situation the congregation was less informed and less involved than he would like. He suspected that his situation was closer to the biblical model. In that he agreed with him. But did he have the letter and spirit of the New Testament on this question? He determined to spend more time studying Acts 6.

Another implication of this issue was the relationship of the church with Bible schools or seminaries. If the church determined that the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 were essential for ministry, then that would mean men who graduated from those schools *might not necessarily be ready* for vocational Christian ministry. Would those schools agree with that?

What about the place of women in the church? Jeff's church had a number of very capable women who were greatly interested, and well-read, on the subject of ministry. Many had attended available seminars and Bible study groups on the subject. What was their place? What did Paul's warning "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" mean (1 Tim. 2:12)? How did that apply? Was there a place for church staff positions for women in the church? Was the distinguishing issue ability or ministry-skill? Jeff knew intrinsically that that was not the issue. He only had to think of the gracious stability and character of his own wife to know

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that. In addition, he had often found himself feeling inadequate in counseling women in matters of home and marriage. He just could not empathize with them as another woman could. He wondered if the Scriptures would reinforce that feeling. Indeed, Robert was right. These were important areas.

my staff feel more like part of the team. It seems that the church-at-large, the body of Christ, is ready for this change. I hope our local church is!

Fourth, the last area you mentioned in your letter has caused me, in some sense, the greatest concern and re-evaluation. It is the area of the home. There is no area that I commit more regularly to the Lord in prayer than my home.

It seems that the home provides a context for both qualification for the ministry and an illustration of commitment to the Lord and to His work. It is true that Paul considers the home—that is, relationships to a wife and children—to be principal considerations for qualification for ministry for an overseer or elder (1 Tim. 3). But it seems also that a commitment to the Lord as first in your life means that the priority of Christian ministry is even greater than the priority to the home. Now I would be the first to say that I want to do the best in both of those areas! Yet, hasn't it been the history of the church that dedicated men and women have left all to follow Christ? Aren't missionaries who use boarding schools for their children an excellent example of this kind of godly commitments?

Likewise, we live in a modern age where fathers (and in increasing numbers, mothers) do not stay home with their children. They go to their jobs. Children go to school. In our busy, modern day it seems prudent to enlist the most capable teachers to train up our children in both Sunday school and in their day school experiences. It seems the church is responsible for taking up the slack caused by the reduced availability of the modern Christian parent. Thus, while I would prefer seeing the father and parents taking primary responsibility for the training of their families, it seems this is impractical in our day. I will continue to study this subject.

Let me say again how glad I was to hear from you! I love

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you as a brother, and always look forward to sharing in your life.
Write again soon!

Committed with your to the
success of the church,

Pastor Robert

Jeff placed the letter from Robert on his desk and stared for a long time out his window. This last area was also, in some senses, the closest to his heart. He and his wife had not yet been blessed with children. Frankly, he wondered where they would get time to rear them. He too was often out three or four evenings every week. A typical workweek involved sixty hours or more of his time. Many days began with early morning meetings and ended with lat nights in the homes of church families. He wondered what his wife would say about this fourth area in Robert's letter. Would she share Robert's enthusiasm and commitment to the ministry—even over the family?

How does a first priority to the Lord size up with competing priorities for work and family? Do we live in a modern age in which the principal role of the parent is assumed by the church? What do our children think of that? What principles offer the best working model for the long-term health of the church?

Jeff glanced at the clock. He was late for an appointment with a real estate agent who had a church building for sale. As he left his office, he remembered his original concerns in his letter to Dr. Mills. He had said that he wanted to build from a biblical blueprint. He certainly was convinced that that determination left a person with more questions than answers. He suspected he knew something of the questions. Now, if he could just begin to come up with some answers.

