

Date: 14 June 2009

Re: Decision Making in the Church

Dear Fellow Class Members:

We were asked last week to spend time exploring the concept of decision making, authority, shepherding, and communication (and implied transparency) of leadership in the church for this morning's class. This is a worthwhile and relevant study, as these are topics receiving national attention in the religious community. There are differing opinions, not only within and among congregations across the country, but here as well. The thoughts contained in this letter are not meant to be exhaustive, nor answer every question, but it is a personal attempt to seek clarity and formulate an approach that I believe is balanced and Biblical.

Frequently, various authors and members of our body have cited one episode in the early church to exemplify the decision making process (I am going to use this term broadly to include the other areas of the leadership process listed above, as I believe they are involved as well): the distribution of food to the Grecian widows found in Acts Chapter 6. There are other passages of Scripture we could look at, but for brevity sake, I am going to concentrate on this one, as I believe it provides insight on how the early church functioned.

The early church began during a massive gathering of Jewish and Proselyte peoples from far and wide to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. Many of those who became Christians stayed for an extended period of time, and being away from their homes, food was getting scarce; in short, people stayed longer than their provisions allowed. Out of necessity, and due to the generosity of the Christian community, those who had food began to share with those who did not. This was a huge undertaking considering the number of people in need. After the distribution of food began, it became apparent that a segment of those without sufficient means were not getting a fair share of the food that was available: the Grecian widows. This problem was brought to the attention of the Apostles, who then formulated a generalized plan of action to rectify the problem and keep it from disrupting the church. With God's help, and the wisdom supplied by Him, they decided that the Christian community should select seven men of spiritual character and integrity to execute a plan to resolve the issue. The church did so, and these men set about the task of organizing, collecting and distributing food. Considering the size of the church gathered in Jerusalem, this would not be an easy endeavor, and would require considerable organizational and people skills, as well as vision and determination. No doubt, multiple decisions would have to be made by these men to facilitate involvement of all parties, and maintain clear channels of communication in order to ensure that the church could grow and thrive.

It seems to me then that decision making was present in all parties involved, though the focus and breadth varied depending upon who you look at. The Apostles set forth an overall plan or vision for this work, and identified the character traits needed to get it accomplished. The church, given those guidelines, selected men worthy of the work. These men, once selected, then had to formulate an action-plan, and do those things necessary to keep the ministry, as well as the church, vibrant and healthy. The Apostles could not do the work they were called to without the help of the church and these seven men. The church could not function effectively without the spiritual leadership of the

Apostles and “The Seven” that were chosen to help them accomplish this important work. The seven men would not have been identified to serve in this way without the oversight of the Apostles, nor been empowered to lead/direct the work without the support of the church. And finally, and this is very important, the Grecian widows would have gone hungry if all parties involved had not cooperated together as a Body, each doing the work God had called it to do.

For the church to thrive and grow today we must do the same. Our spiritual leaders/shepherds must spend their time devoted to prayer, Biblical study, counseling, visiting, protecting, correcting, and teaching, so that they are prepared to provide an overall vision and “moral compass”, if you will, for the local church. The elders must be approachable, loving, gentle, hospitable, sensible, mature, as well as knowledgeable and courageous as Christian leaders. They must be aware of the congregation’s needs, just as a shepherd is toward the flock entrusted to his care, and ready to lay down their lives in its defense. These men must exemplify Christ in their thoughts and actions. Their tone and character should have a positive and permeating effect on the congregation; their influence and counsel should lead a congregation towards spiritual success and maturity (ideally, congregations are led, not driven). Those leading in ministry take their cue from the overall vision and direction provided by the elders. Needs identified by the congregation, via the intimate insight elders should possess, are tended to by ministry leaders or servants. These “servant leaders” share many of the same characteristics as their shepherds. They too must be diligent and accountable for the work they have been called upon to do, as they effectively serve, and empower and enable the congregation to serve as well. Members of the Christian community, the local church, must serve and work cooperatively to make a difference in the lives of each other and the unchurched. It is only when the Body, the church, functions in a way that reflects Christ’s ultimate authority and their submission to His will, that the church becomes truly loving, joyful, vibrant, and robust.

As the Body of Christ, we should, by design, be interdependent (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12 & Ephesians 4); each of us is a part of the whole and has a role to play. We are connected by Christ to one another. We are also connected as a Body to Him. Christ is our Leader and Savior, and has ultimate authority. We made a decision when we became a Christian to be God’s/Christ’s servant. We made a commitment to seek His will in our lives, and not our own. We must submit to and honor Christ, but we also must submit to and honor one another out of reverence for Christ. It is my hope and prayer that we can love one another enough to do that well at Hazel Dell. Only humility, love and a focus on Christ, and Him crucified and raised from the dead, will empower us to do so.

I look forward to our continued discussion and study together.

Respectfully submitted in Christ,

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Wesley Hamm