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**Moving from a Deacon-Led to an Elder-Led Church**

**March 31, 2010 – Phil A. Newton**

In one of my early pastorates, two deacons did something unusual: they actually shepherded the congregation. Apart from those two men, the church had a typical mid-twentieth-century Baptist polity: eight deacons served as a board of directors, and the congregation as a whole voted on virtually every decision affecting church life at monthly business meetings. The deacons generally focused on property, finances, and occasional squabbles.

**ELDERS BY ANY OTHER NAME?**

Yet in both character and practice, these two men did the work of elders. They simply lacked the title. They kept watch over and shepherded the church (Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 1:2), taught sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), exercised spiritual oversight (1 Peter 5:2), and set an example of faithful Christian living (1 Peter 5:3).

I seriously doubt that either man thought of himself as an elder. But that’s precisely what the church should have recognized. Instead, the church confused the biblical offices, which are important for the church’s health, and expected deacons to act like elders without the necessary qualifications, gifts, or authority.

Could the problem have been settled by merely changing all the deacons’ title to elders? Absolutely not! While two men already fulfilled the office, the rest clearly did the role of deacons—servants of the church—with occasional elders’ responsibilities foisted upon them.

How can such a “deacon model” church—or any church in a similar situation—move toward recognizing the qualified men as elders? First, you, the pastor, would need to address the obstacles in the way of implementing the biblical model.

**OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF TRANSITIONING TO ELDERS**

**1. The congregation probably doesn’t understand the Bible’s teaching on elders.** In moving to recognize men as elders, you are asking a congregation to understand and implement a biblical practice. This requires the patient exposition of Scripture—engaging the congregation, small groups, and individuals in interpreting and applying God’s Word. Many objections to changes in polity lose their sting when Christians think biblically.

**2. Many congregations have a long history with a bloated, unwieldy congregationalism.** Rather than a healthy, robust congregationalism, this church that I mentioned above practiced congregational micromanagement. Nothing got done without laborious business meetings, which often ended in hurt feelings and bruised egos. Changing this, again, requires patient teaching and dialogue on the New Testament and the historical ideas of congregationalism. Maybe teach the church about its own doctrinal confession (if it’s a good one), explaining what it says about the offices of elders/deacons, while also showing how congregationalism developed in this particular setting. Such a study provides a platform for setting forth a portrait of biblical and effective church polity.

**3. When moving from a deacon model to an elder model, the deacons who are not selected to become elders may become jealous.**Such jealousy can splay into massive division, often scuttling any chance for the church to transition their leadership structure. How can this be addressed? By taking a long-range view of elder and deacon leadership. Concentrate on biblical qualifications for current deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13), thus raising the bar. This thins the number of deacon candidates. Also, labor to show the biblical distinction between the two offices’ responsibilities. A man who simply desires a title has no business acquiring one. Lay out expectations for deacons and elders so that the church anticipates their biblical practice. A few may continue to harbor jealousy, but the church will likely be wise to it.

**4. Perhaps no current deacons are qualified to serve as elders.**Merely transitioning one title to another with more intense duties will not help. Rather, men must be cultivated with a view toward serving as elders. Begin by recognizing men that appear to be “above reproach” (Titus 1:6). Help them develop greater consistency in their walks with Christ.

Nurture them in God’s Word and sound doctrine. Do they show love for the Word? Can they articulate sound doctrine? After a period of regular dialogue over the Scriptures, give them opportunities to teach. Critique, encourage, and evaluate them. Are they teachable and eager to help the body understand God’s Word?

Take them with you on pastoral visits. Do they delight in shepherding the flock? Recognize that some rightly belong in the office of deacon. However, a few may evidence the qualities needed in elders. Continue investing in these men. Give them responsibilities for shepherding the church so that the congregation can begin to see the value of having non-staff elders.

**LEADING THE TRANSITION**

Beyond all these obstacles is the actual transition. How can a pastor lead the transition from deacons to elders as the spiritual leaders in the church?

**Speed Kills**

As the bumper sticker puts it, “Speed Kills.” So does an impatient move to turn qualified deacons into elders. Trying to do this without adequate preparation will likely create chaos if not the sudden loss of a pastorate!

How much time is adequate for the transition? That will vary, but I tend to think a minimum of 18 months to three years is necessary to transition the leadership structure of a church. Why so long? Because most churches lack biblical clarity. They have lived with their polity structures without scrutinizing them in light of Scripture, and you, the pastor are calling on them to uproot long-held positions.

So if you want this to change, you must patiently teach biblical polity, layering through different venues: the pulpit, Bible study, small group, men’s meetings, one-on-one, and so on. Layering serves the church better than offering a crash course in polity. More important, however, than changing polity is teaching the church to think biblically. The better a pastor teaches his congregation to rightly interpret Scripture, the better they’ll be able to understand biblical church leadership and desire the change themselves, which will lead to a far smoother transition.

**Be Intentional**

Be intentional. Give the congregation space to work toward a biblical understanding of polity. Perhaps you, the pastor, had to work through polity issues over several years. The church will likely need the same amount of time, if not more. Few react well to new concepts crammed down their throats.

**CONCLUSION**

So set goals, but be patient. Teach, preach, and pray until the church delights in the gospel. As the congregation begins to grasp the nature and mission of the church, connect the structural dots for them. In time, they will hopefully begin to respond to the Word. Then lay out a plan to nominate qualified men to serve as elders. Following the method prescribed in the church’s governing documents, revise the polity to reflect elder leadership in the congregation. And throughout the transition, seek to move forward humbly and patiently for the glory of Christ and the good of your church.

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