

Healthy Church Leadership

Acts 6:1-7

This morning as we continue to study the first half of Acts we are going to see a vision for what healthy church leadership can look like. There are a lot of examples of unhealthy church leadership in our world today. It can go from one end of the spectrum to another. In some cases the elders in a church are aloof and uninvolved. When it comes to making decisions, they throw in their two cents worth, pull out their rubber stamp and give their vote of approval, but all they do is make decisions at meetings. When it comes to actually leading the church that is under their care, they are uninvolved. In other cases the leaders can be too involved and controlling and end up micromanaging everything to the point where no one wants to do anything because they can't live up to their standards.

There are plenty of stories out there where church leadership has been deceptive or corrupt and have used the church for their own agenda or personal gain. There are sex abuse scandals and fraud that seem to make front page news all too often. In a lot of churches there's really only one leader – a Sr. Pastor, and the health and well-being of the church rises and falls with his strengths or weaknesses which can vary greatly from one pastor to the next and send a church on a wild roller coaster ride.

So church leadership can be a mess and when it's a mess it can leave the whole church in a mess. But it doesn't have to be that way. In our passage today we are going to see what healthy church leadership can look like and the blessing that it is to the church. We're going to see what it looks like and then look at our goals for church leadership at East Lincoln. You may remember last week that after the apostles were beaten, it was like pouring fuel on the fire of their passion for the Lord and they went about teaching Jesus more and more. So the church was growing rapidly. But because of the rapid growth, a problem arose and that's what we read about at the beginning of chapter 6.

Read Acts 6:1.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

One of the major priorities of the early church was caring for the poor among them and especially widows. This ministry clearly expressed the love and compassion of Christ in a practical way. At the beginning this didn't include a lot of people, but as the church grew and multiplied to include thousands of people, there were many widows to take care of. According to theologian John Gill, the daily practice was that some people in the church would collect bread, or some other food, or fruit, or money and in the evening they would divide these gifts among the widows in order to meet their basic needs.

But a problem arose – a major issue that led to serious frustration among some people in the church. The people who were doing the collecting and distribution among the widows were Jews from Judea – like the disciples themselves. They were Hebrews and spoke the Hebrew language. But as the church multiplied and grew, another group of Jews became followers of Christ and were part of this church in Jerusalem. These were Hellenists or Jews who were from foreign nations, but who had migrated back to Jerusalem. So they were foreign Jews who didn't speak Hebrew, but the Greek language. Due to the language barrier, it is my assumption that the Jews from Judea were part of one community and the Hellenistic Jews were part of their own, so even though they were all part of the church in Jerusalem they identified with their own communities.

A complaint from the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because they were neglecting their widows in the daily distribution. We aren't told if this was accidental or intentional. It might have been an honest mistake or it might have been some racial favoritism or discrimination – we don't know. But we do know it was causing tension. It was the kind of situation that could easily lead to conflict and a church split. If something like that were to happen in our day and age it would probably result in one group splitting off from the other and forming their own church. So I see the potential for serious division and a church split in this situation.

Church leaders have to deal with this stuff all the time. People that belong to different groups focus their attention on their particular group and its needs and preferences and aren't aware of or don't think about the needs or preferences of others. This can take shape with different ministry groups in the church, different age groups, different genders, different music preferences, different ideas about

how to spend money, and so on. Disagreements can quickly rise up over small or big issues and all of a sudden two sides form that are in conflict with each other.

Again, this happens all the time and there are all kinds of stories of where church leaders have really blown it. Sometimes they ignore the problem and hope it goes away, but it doesn't and eventually explodes. Sometimes they take sides, even though it's not a matter of right and wrong, and the other side feels rejected. Sometimes they come up with solutions to try to fix the problem that don't really accomplish anything. And the list goes on. Churches often find themselves in precarious situations and they need their leaders to step up and do something or things quickly fall apart. What kind of leadership do churches need in situations like these? We see a great example in the following verses.

Read Acts 6:2.

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

So the twelve apostles who were the leaders of this church didn't ignore the divisive situation. They took action. My guess is that the Hellenistic Jews had put the pressure on them to take over the distribution ministry themselves to make sure it was done right – a temptation that many church leaders are faced with when a ministry is struggling: "The only way to get it done right is if we do it ourselves." I don't know how many pastors and church leaders end up spending all their time dealing with ministry details and issues and don't have time left over for what they're really supposed to be doing, but it's a lot. It's a constant battle, I can tell you from experience.

But these twelve leaders didn't give in to the pressure. Instead they gathered the whole church together – both communities that were in conflict – and they told them, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables." They knew what they were supposed to do and they knew that if they neglected that it would lead to far greater problems in the future. So they told that to the people and then they offered them a better solution.

Read Acts 6:3-4.

³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

There is so much wisdom to be gained from this solution. The first thing they suggested was that the people themselves pick out men from among themselves to oversee the daily distribution. By doing this, everyone would be represented and neither of the groups would be left out. But they weren't to pick out just anyone, they gave them some clear characteristics to look for. It's easy in those situations for the people who are most upset or most affected by the problem to be eager to serve, but they are almost always the wrong people to be in that position. They likely aren't ready for it and would be coming in with their own agenda. So in this situation the apostles told them what to look for – men who had a good reputation, who were well thought of and looked up to in the church and their community. Men who were full of the Spirit – godly men with godly motives and character, who were submissive to the Holy Spirit. Men who were full of wisdom – who didn't make rash decisions, but thought through situations and made wise decisions. These were the kind of men they were to be looking for.

They were to find seven such men and bring them to the apostles who would appoint them to this ministry. So they would be recognized by all as being given authority by the church leaders to carry out their responsibilities. By appointing these men to oversee the distribution, the apostles would be able to continue to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. In both ways the church would come out ahead. The preaching and teaching ministry would not suffer. Other qualified men would be mobilized for ministry. Everyone in the church would be represented. And the needs of the widows would no longer be overlooked. This is a great example of wise, godly, church leadership. That's the kind of leadership I think God wants churches to have and I think people in the church want to have as well. We can see how the people responded in the last few verses.

Read Acts 6:5-7.

⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Division was resolved, a church split was avoided, the problem was solved, and the church became stronger because of it. Wise, godly church leadership is one of God's gifts to the church. It's the kind of leadership God wants for us and as we look at becoming the church God wants us to be, this is a critical piece of the puzzle.

I want you to know that this is something we take very seriously at East Lincoln. We used to have a system where we operated more like a non-profit organization where people were nominated and elected to serve as elders with just a phone call and a vote at a congregational meeting and then they were in. There was an effort to find godly men for this position, but there was no testing or training and men weren't prepared for what they had been called to do. It left the church vulnerable to division and dependent on the strengths or weaknesses of a Sr. Pastor. In the past ten years we've gone to a lot of effort to change this all around.

We spent a lot of time studying biblical eldership and developing guidelines for how we would identify and train men to be elders. Men who aspire to be elders now go through about a two year process of evaluation and training to prepare them for the role. Those who are approved by the elders and congregation are appointed to elder ministry and held accountable to biblical qualifications. As a Council of Elders we take our responsibilities very seriously to oversee and shepherd this church so that we experience unity and growth and stay on track with our mission and what God has called us to do.

Now the reality is that most people are not called into church leadership, but that doesn't mean this has nothing to do with you. The elders and ministry leaders of this church need your prayers, encouragement, and support. Much of ministry is positive and exciting, but there are often difficult issues and situations we have to deal with. We need the strength and wisdom of the Holy Spirit and we need all of you to pray to that end. I encourage you if you have a regular cycle of intercessory prayer to include the elders and church leaders on your list.

The elders and leaders also need your willingness and involvement in the ministries of the church. In the same way that the seven men were chosen and appointed to meaningful ministry in the church of Jerusalem, it is our desire and hope that you are involved in ministry in our church as well – making it a priority. Not treating it like something to do if you still have time, but giving it the value that God gives it in our lives. It's so easy for church ministry to fall by the wayside with everything else going on, but that will only lead to an ever-weakening church. So I ask you to resolve in your hearts to make a commitment to the life and ministry of this church so that we can continue to grow stronger and make more of an impact on our community together.

And finally, some of you may sense God's calling on your heart to pursue eldership or another leadership position in the church. Being in that position doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to prepare and learn to use your gifts in a way that will be beneficial for the church. So if you sense God's calling toward leadership in the church and you haven't talked to me about it already, please do and you can begin to take steps in that direction.