

The Blessing of Shared Leadership

Exodus 18

This morning I want to take us to Exodus 18, which records what happened when Israel first reached Mount Sinai. We saw last week that they had to cross a wilderness to get there – a wilderness where Yahweh revealed himself as a much different God than the gods of Egypt and a much different ruler than Pharaoh. He would be their Healer, Provider, and Rest. He was merciful and patient and would be their Defender and Protector. He also brought to the surface some of their deep rooted sin problems that would need to be transformed to move forward in relationship with him – grumbling, pride, unbelief, and self-reliance. These were the beginnings of forming a relationship where he would be their God and they would be his people.

But now, after weeks in the wilderness, they were at Mount Sinai. This was the place where God would form a covenant with them and establish them as his people, giving them statutes and rules to follow, prescribing a pathway for worshipping him, and giving instructions for building a tabernacle where he would come to dwell in their midst. These would make them distinct from any other nation – the people of Yahweh.

The first thing that took place at Mt. Sinai had to do with the establishment of basic government. Government can be a bitter subject nowadays because of differing goals and ideals in our political system and the bitter conflict between the two political parties. But if you can see past the politics, you can see that government is really a huge blessing. Imagine a world without government, where everyone was free to do whatever they wanted to do. It would be a disaster. Government is needed – good government that blesses people and doesn't dominate or bring harm.

We see government at many levels – national, state, county, local. There's even government in clubs, organizations, businesses, and churches. Groups of people don't function best without some structure and direction. They function best with a healthy level of order and organization that's fixed upon common goals and direction, where individuals know their role and have the freedom to operate and both contribute and be blessed by the whole.

This morning we're going to end up talking about government in the church – an important thing for us to understand if we're going to flourish as a church family. How do whings work here at East Lincoln? There are many different forms of church government that can be good or bad. Some churches are very authoritarian – decisions are made by a leader or governing body and directives are given from the top down. There's very little room for input or discussion by the people, they're just expected to step in line and do what they're told. Other churches are the opposite – the people have a lot of freedom and authority to make their own decisions and govern themselves. And then there are churches that land somewhere in between.

How should churches be governed? How do things work at East Lincoln Alliance Church? In our passage for today we're going to see the establishment of governing structure among the people of Israel and we're going to consider our own governing structure as guided by the New Testament.

When God brought his people to Mount Sinai, the first thing we read about is the establishment of basic governing structure. This was a foundational step for the community of Israel to come to function smoothly and effectively. God did this in an interesting way – through Moses' father-in-law Jethro.

Read Exodus 18:1-9.

Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. ² Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, ³ along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), ⁴ and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"). ⁵ Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. ⁶ And when he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her," ⁷ Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. ⁸ Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. ⁹ And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.

So Jethro shows up with Moses' wife and sons and is amazed by what he sees and hears from his son in law Moses. He rejoiced in what God had done and went on to offer sacrifices to God that evening because he was the priest of Midian. But the next day he saw something that was concerning to him.

Read Exodus 18:13-18.

The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. ¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" ¹⁵ And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; ¹⁶ when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." ¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

Jethro observed a kind of governing structure that had come into place but was doomed for failure. The load was far more than any one man could carry and he and the people would end up wearing themselves out in a short time – Moses from overworking and the people from over-waiting. It also could be that Jethro saw a situation that would be very unhealthy for his daughter and grandchildren – Moses' wife and two boys. Their family would not do well if Moses continued in that position. So he told Moses: "What you are doing is not good." Moses was doing good things, but it wasn't good – it wasn't going to work. Something needed to change in order for him and the new community of Israel to flourish. So Jethro had some good advice.

Read Exodus 18:19-23.

Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, ²⁰ and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. ²¹ Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²² And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier

for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.”

Jethro prescribed a new governing structure for the community of Israel. Rather than Moses doing all the work, he was to delegate responsibility. Find able men from among all the people – honorable men with integrity and character – and establish them as chiefs whose role it would be to judge the people. They would be governors of the people at different levels. They could listen to the issues, they could make decisions, and the cases that were beyond them and their level of expertise, they would send up to Moses.

The blessings of that governing structure would be bountiful – it would be much easier for Moses, many would bear the burden, God would direct them, Moses would be able to endure, and the people would find themselves at peace. That’s what healthy government should do. It should be a blessing for the people and allow the leadership to function in a way that strengthens and gives direction for the community. Moses took Jethro’s advice and implemented these things at Mount Sinai and things functioned much more smoothly. This general practice continued through Israel’s history with their chiefs, elders and judges.

This account helps us to see the importance and blessing of good governing structure in a community. And as I think about its relevance in our lives it makes me think about the governing structure of the church. There were principles and practices established at that time that are still important today in the organization of the local church.

I’ve seen a number of different churches in my life that operate in different ways and you can see the wisdom of Jethro’s advice in the church. I’ve seen churches that have a Sr. Pastor who tries to do everything – like Moses was trying to do. They are trying to do good things, but what they’re doing is not good because it’s way too much for one person. Pastors end up burning out, their wives struggle, their kids rebel, needs in the church go unmet, and the church ends up going through multiple pastoral transitions which is never good. It’s just too much.

On the other hand I’ve heard of churches where there isn’t much governing leadership and a lot of decisions have to be made by the whole congregation and a congregational vote. In those churches, things really get bogged down. Change

and growth doesn't happen because people disagree and can't come to a decision, or decisions take a long time.

But churches that seem to function well are those who have shared leadership among several spiritual leaders and the bigger the church, the bigger the number of leaders. That's the same structure that Jethro was advising Moses to switch to. Not just one leader, not a lack of leadership, but multiple leaders in the community.

We see this kind of approach as Jesus was laying the groundwork for the beginning of the NT church. He chose 12 men to be his disciples and trained them to do the work of the ministry. Jesus didn't do it all, he shared the ministry responsibilities with others and prepared them to lead. These became the leaders of the church that formed in Jerusalem after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Then, as the church began to grow and the ministry needs expanded, the disciples recognized that even with 12 of them, they couldn't meet the needs of the growing community.

Read Acts 6:1-4, 7.

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. 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. ³ Therefore, 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. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 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.

So the twelve disciples focused on the ministry of the Word and prayer and delegated other responsibilities to other able leaders. Shared leadership within the first church community and it resulted in blessing – the same principles Moses implemented in the new Israelite community. As the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem and groups of believers started coming together in other cities, this pattern of shared leadership continued. Paul and Silas planted churches in Galatia, Asia, and Macedonia and then they appointed shared leadership.

Acts 14:21-23: *“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*

So they appointed elders in every church – shared responsibility to lead and govern the churches. There are many examples of this same pattern in the New Testament. This was the structure by which early churches were organized. Not one leader like Moses, nor were churches expected to function without leadership. Governing structure was important and intentional so that churches could grow and flourish.

In writing to the church in Ephesus, Paul explained Christ’s intentional design for establishing healthy churches. Ephesians 4:11-13 says, *“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”* The apostles, prophets, and evangelists were people like Paul and his team who first established churches in new communities, and the shepherds and teachers were the leaders within those church communities who were appointed to oversee and govern each church.

These things are important when it comes to healthy churches and that’s what we’re aiming for here at East Lincoln. We are not looking for a Sr. Pastor who will try to do everything, but rather multiple leaders who will share the burden of responsibility. So we have several elders as well as many other leaders at different levels to carry the load. Some oversee larger areas of ministry like small groups, men’s and women’s ministries, and youth ministry. Others oversee a smaller area, like a single small group, or a particular event, or more specific area of ministry. We try to practice the same pattern that Jethro advised Moses to follow way back at Mount Sinai.

If we are going to be a healthy church, we are always going to need shared leadership. That doesn’t mean that everyone is going to become a leader, but

many of us will. Many of us need to at some level. There needs to be leadership in families, small groups, youth and children's ministry, men's and women's ministries, and many other areas. We need elders to serve who are called to oversee the general vision and direction of the church.

So for the application of this passage to our lives today I encourage you to do two things. One comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 where it says: "*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*" Appreciate, support, and pray for those who are in leadership in the church.

The other comes from 1 Timothy 3:1: "*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*" This has to do with eldership, but it could apply to any area of leadership – it is good for us to aspire to leadership – to consider and pray about whether or not God wants us to step into a position of leadership in the church at some level. We need lots of leaders in order to function well as a church. So as opportunities come before them, pray about them and seek the Lord's will. Be open to what he calls you to do. As we continue to go in that direction we will see the Lord's blessing more and more in our church family as he continues to lead us.