

Leadership in Church: Simply Servants

This week we embark again on our tri-annual tradition of reviewing the leadership of our congregation. In your mailboxes are materials that will explain this process more fully and guide you through it. To go through this process every three years is a little unusual in most churches I think. But our experience over the last nearly 40 years has proven to be a blessing. Not only has it provided us good feedback from the congregation concerning the leadership, it allows us to regularly incorporate into our leadership those among us who we feel would be good additions. So the elders ask that you begin praying for this process that it will be led by the Spirit and the results will be a blessing to this church.

This morning I want to look at the work of elders and deacons and the qualities scripture reveals to us that are needed to serve in such roles. But when we look to scripture one of the first things we notice is how little information in the New Testament we are actually given, especially when you consider the detailed instructions provided for selecting leaders in Israel. The Old Testament book of Leviticus is devoted to providing detailed instructions for how Israel should select leaders, specifying all the various duties and tasks that the religious leaders, the priests and Levites, were to perform. We do not find anything like a Leviticus in the New Testament.

In the New Testament we find passages here and there that give us insight into the work of elders and deacons. Passages in 1 Timothy describe qualities that the apostle Paul said were important in the selection of leaders for the church in Ephesus even as passages in Titus guide the selection of leaders for the churches on the island of Crete. In Acts 6 Luke describes how the church in Jerusalem set apart men to distribute food to the widows of that church. We notice that letters written to churches in the New Testament were addressed to elders, never to a single elder which leads us to believe churches in New Testament times were led by more than just one elder. We know from 1 Peter 5:1-4 that elders provided spiritual oversight and counsel and direction for churches. We know from Hebrews 13:7 that the leaders of the flock had the authority to make certain decisions and that those decisions were to be respected and followed and that the elders will give an account to God for their decisions, but we are not told explicitly what issues those decisions addressed or what the extent of a church leaders' authority was. In many churches in Africa for example one cannot be married without the elders' permission. Few elders in America exercise that kind of authority. We know from James 5:14 that members who were sick were counseled to meet with the elders for prayer and to be anointed with

oil. We know from 1 Timothy 5:17 that some elders were supported financially and served as public teachers.

In all these passages we believe the counsel of Paul and Peter and James and others was inspired by the Holy Spirit in those days to those different churches and we believe it remains wise counsel for us today. But it seems the Spirit never intended either Paul or Luke or Peter or anyone else to write a New Testament version of the Book of Leviticus that provided specific direction to every church in every place in every age throughout history regardless of culture. In fact, such a book would be inconceivable to write. Unlike Moses, who brought down from Mt. Sinai all of God's law to be delivered to all of God's people at one time and in one place, in the New Testament we have instead, the apostles writing to different churches in different places with different needs and providing specific counsel for different situations. Blueprints for organization are conspicuously absent in the New Testament, especially when one considers the precise detail given for the organization and activity of God's people in the Old Testament.

As much as we might wish it were different, God did not choose to give us a book that provides explicit and detailed instructions that address every situation that the Church might face or every issue that may be involved in the organization and governance of the church. Because of that

we have been tempted to add another book to the New Testament, a book that we create by searching the scriptures and finding bits and pieces of passages that address church government that we cut and paste together to create a makeshift New Testament version of the Book of Leviticus.

Let me illustrate. Imagine if I were to ask Randy Allen to build me a house. He would draw a complete set of plans, a blueprint detailing explicit instructions concerning every aspect of the house: electrical, plumbing, heating and cooling, the structure and roof etc. That is very like the Law given at Sinai. But imagine if I were living in a house that Randy had built but was having plumbing or electrical problems. I would call him and ask what to do. He would give me specific instructions to address the problems and I'd be wise to follow them. I might even decide to collect all of these instructions he gave me to refer to later. They would be invaluable because they came from the architect of the house, but they would not be blueprints. What we have in the New Testament is more like Randy's letters. Christians have not so much been given a blueprint as we have been provided with an ongoing relationship with the architect. The one who is building the Church is Christ and the best guidance for how the Church should be will always come from his life, his teaching and his counsel. He is himself the blueprint; he is himself the pattern.

We look to Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, who were giving instruction for setting up leadership in the city of Ephesus and the many rural villages on the island of Crete, because in Paul's guidance we can see how the Spirit led Paul to address various specific situations and needs. Paul's instructions give us insight for example into what kind of characteristics and qualities are important when selecting leaders. But we should not forget that these passages were written at different times for different people to address different needs created by different and unique situations.

The church in Crete did not have the letter Paul wrote to Timothy nor did the church in Ephesus have the letter written to the church in Crete and neither had access to Luke's Book of Acts. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus do not have the exact same instructions. For example Paul says nothing to Titus about the qualifications of deacons. Neither does Paul give Titus anything like the extensive instruction he gives to Timothy for the work of the widows. The letters contain different instructions because the churches were different and had different needs. Churches on Crete were new churches, smaller, early in their development. Paul's reason for writing to Titus was to make sure there were elders appointed in the various new and young churches across the island of Crete.

The church in Ephesus on the other hand had been around for several years. It was a city church; it probably had more members and more ministries including a very active ministry to widows that was led mostly by the women. The church had many leaders who had served for some time and the main reason Paul writes to Timothy was because some of those leaders some were causing problems by introducing into the church the false teaching of the many philosophies and religions so prevalent in Ephesus. The leadership needs and issues of the churches in Crete and Ephesus were as different as the needs of Lubbock, Texas and Mbale, Uganda.

The practical situations churches face throughout history and across the world will always be different, but we believe the underlying principles we find in the counsel of scripture remain applicable to every church in every age. We have access to those basic principles both through the scriptures testimony of a Spirit led first century church and through the ongoing indwelling of that same Spirit in us today as we try to apply the scriptures today and lead the church in a way that honors the Spirit of Jesus.

And we learn from Jesus that one of the most if not the most important qualities of leadership in his Kingdom is the willingness, more than that, the eagerness leaders must have to be simply servant. *“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be*

first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43). When we think of the work of elders and deacons, and the qualifications of elders and deacons, we are often quick to point out the distinctions between the two. We look at a passage like Acts chapter 6 and see the elders/apostles setting aside some men to serve the physical needs of the widows in the Jerusalem church “to wait on tables” so that the elders and apostles could be free to give their attention to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-4). Based on this passage we sometimes differentiate the role of elders as providing spiritual leadership and direction while deacons serve by facilitating in a variety of physical and material matters.

There is an element of truth in that. But for all the differences there may be between the work of elders and deacons, there is a far more basic similarity in their work, for the fundamental work of everyone in the kingdom is to be servants. In fact, according to the scriptures, all of us are deacons. The word deacon has come to have a very official sound to our ears but the English word is only a transliteration of the original Greek work *diakoneo*, which literally means a waiter or a servant and it is used in the scriptures to describe every conceivable work that might be done by a member of Christ’s Church.

Jesus is referred to in the gospels as one who serves (*diakoneo*) rather than one who is served (Lk 22:27; Mk10:45; Matt 20:28). The word describing Jesus in these passages is the very same word used in the gospels when referring to waiters at a banquet (Matt 22:13), women who care for people's basic needs (Matthew 8:15) and household servants (Jn 2:5). It is the word used to describe the work of messengers, maids, cooks and stewards.

The message of Jesus is clear if we will hear it; if you would be great in God's kingdom, you must commit yourself to being a deacon, a servant to all (Matthew 23:11; Mark 9:35). Whatever work we may be called to do, it is important we understand that work as the work of a servant, a "deacon." Whether one is feeding widows, preaching the gospel or hosting the church in one's home, each was considered a deacon of Christ. The apostle Paul repeatedly describes his own work in the Kingdom as the work of a deacon; he described himself as a deacon of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6), a deacon of God (2 Corinthians 6:4), a deacon of the gospel (Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23; 1 Corinthians 3:5), a deacon of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23), and a deacon of the Church (Colossians 1:25). He also describes his fellow workers Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5), Timothy (1 Timothy 4:6) and Phoebe (Romans 16:1) as deacons in the Kingdom.

As we go about the work here at Quaker, our various tasks and responsibilities may be different, but our status is the same. We are all simply servants of God. Some of the servants among us may be given responsibility to lead in various ways, but leadership in the Kingdom of God is a very different kind of leadership than in the world. Our example of leadership is Jesus, who though He was equal with God, gave up that equality, that status in order to become a servant to others. Jesus unveiled a picture of leadership for his Church that was radical, a model unknown in the world at that time. In Christ's Church all are servants, all are deacons.

The emphasis of Paul and Jesus on the servanthood of all in the Church reveals the radical and unprecedented nature of government or leadership in the Church. Christ is king, and the rest of us are fellow servants under his kingship. Leadership in the Church is different than leadership in the world because the Church is a different kind of reality than any other organization or institution in the world.

The Church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual reality, a supernatural reality, wonderfully different from anything else ever experienced by mankind. Paul says it is God's intent that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3:10). The work of the Church is powered by the spiritual

energy of Christ in us. Paul writes, *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.* (Colossians 1:28-29).

The Church is more than a merely natural organization like a service club or civic organization. Many of us are members of good organizations that do many good works. But our membership in the church is different. Members of civic organizations are called volunteers. There are no volunteers in the Church. Volunteers are people who join an organization to give some of their time and some of their money and some of their selves to help out. The Church is not an organization we join, it is a spiritual reality we become a part of when we become a part of Christ.

When we place our faith in Christ and are baptized into Christ, we are not giving a part of our selves to Christ, we are giving all of ourselves to become a part of Christ; a part of Christ's body. Christ does not direct some of our life, he directs all of it. Christ did not "volunteer" to come to earth for a few years to help us out, he gave himself completely to us for all time, for all eternity, so that we could in turn give ourselves completely to him.

Christ directs each of us individually through his Spirit and that is also how he directs his Body, the Church. Just as the various physical cells of

our body are controlled and coordinated by the head, the brain, the spirit of our body, so it is in the Church. God's Spirit works in us and within us and among us weaving and knitting us together into his Church. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul changes his metaphor from a body to a building, specifically a temple. *"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit* (Ephesians 2:21-22).

God dwells in the Church through his Spirit and through his Spirit Christ directs his body, he erects his temple, he leads his Church. Frankly this is a mystery we must accept by faith. Each of us are all parts of his Body, uniquely arranged and connected to do the will of the head, which is Christ. There are many pictures of the Church in scripture. We are all children of the same father, servants of the same master, disciples of the same teacher, soldiers of the same captain. So when we think about leadership in the Church, we must guard against the temptation to adopt or be influenced by worldly, natural ideas of leadership. Worldly leadership emphasizes office, title, and status. Christ's Church emphasizes service. Worldly leadership exalts the great. Christ said to be great one must be the least of all. Worldly leadership seeks to accomplish the will of man. Those

who lead Christ's Church seeks only to do the will of God. Worldly leadership emphasizes hierarchy and position and authority but in Christ's Church the emphasis is on mutual submission of individuals to one another and the submission and obedience of us all to Christ.

In the world we have elaborate organizational charts with intricate job descriptions, lines of accountability and hierarchical structures. And sometimes Christians have been tempted to create similar elaborate organizational structures for the Church. And perhaps in some situations such a structure may be needed. But that is our creation. We do not see in the scriptures anything like a detailed, elaborate pattern of organization. The focus is more on the organizing presence of the indwelling Christ. He is Lord and we are servants. He has work to do; we are the ones through whom he does it. And somehow, through his indwelling presence in his servants, Christ accomplishes his work and his will on earth.

The servant power of the Church is great. Jesus himself is in each member and gives us the ability to be the unique deacons he has called us to be. Our Lord is better served when we emphasize the ministry, the servanthood, the "deaconhood" of all who work in the kingdom and reserve all position and authority and glory and power exclusively to the only one who is worthy of it, the one we all serve, Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we do that, the needed differences in our service should become clear as each of us becomes submitted to the will of Christ in us, having his mind, experiencing his life. The distinction we make between elders and other servants is simply that they are servants who are older in Christ and have gained by the testimony of their lives the trust of the flock to lead. But each of us as members are fellow servants, led by Christ to be his presence in our world, our city, our neighborhoods our schools our workplaces our homes. And when we do this, the world will see in the Church something qualitatively different than bosses and employees, rulers and subjects, superiors and inferiors. They will see Christ in us, not so much by the organization of our churches, but by the miracle of the Incarnation happening all over again, as Christ once again is present on earth through his spirit taking up residence in us and enabling us to reflect to this world the spirit of the one who came not to be served but to serve. May all of us who are privileged to serve in leadership positions today and those who may be chosen to serve in the days to come aspire to lead like Christ, willing to empty ourselves and be content to be simply servants.