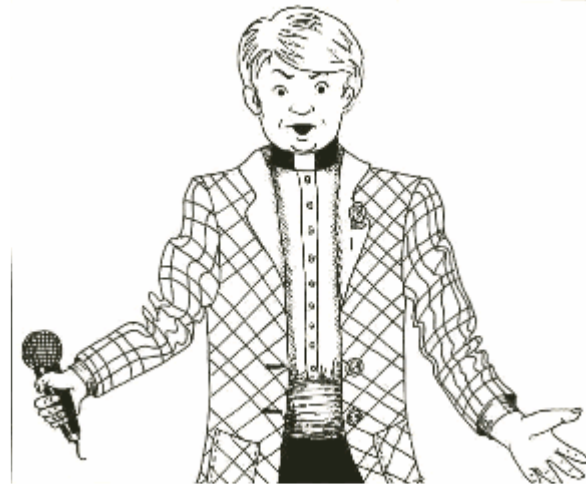


Ministry 7

Develop Fellowship Within and Among Congregations

The next day, a group of men from Learner's congregation arrive at his house with Mr. Foolish, who announces, "Learner, we went to hear that famous preacher in my cousin's church. I have gone several times now. We are inviting you to go with us to learn how to run a real campaign for God. We are doing everything wrong. We have to do evangelism like he does. He really knows how to preach! I'm going to start a new group here that follows this great man's teaching! Others in the church agree with me. This is God's will for our church."



Obey Christ's Command to Love One Another

Learner feels angry as he looks at the faces of the men. He tells Sara after they leave, "It looks like the idea that Mr. Foolish brought back from his cousin's church is spreading through our congregation. It has already caused painful division."

The next time the congregation meets the people argue with each other. The confusion is spreading. He sends a message to Mr. Wise, who answers with a letter for the people of Learner's congregation. Learner reads it to them:

Brothers and sisters, I ask you to follow Paul's example in the book of 1 Corinthians. I ask you in the name of Jesus to stop arguing with each other. Live in true harmony so there will not be any divisions in the congregation. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. You learned to obey Jesus' commands in childlike faith and love. Do not stop now. Some of you say, 'I follow Mr. Wise.' Others say, 'I follow Learner.' Others want to follow the preacher from the church that Mr. Foolish visits with his cousin. Is Christ divided into pieces? Was I, Mr. Wise, crucified for you? This attitude comes from pride.

When I first came to you, I did not use big words or fancy ideas. I concentrated on Jesus and His death on the cross. My message and preaching was plain, but the Holy Spirit used it. We do not use the wisdom of the world. Remember that not many of you were wise or powerful in the eyes of the world, but God did wonderful things in your lives with His power. Learner is following my example, and you must obey him and your other shepherding elders, because they are teaching you the Word of God.

Mr. Foolish starts to interrupt but Learner continues to read.

Did you forget that all of you together are the temple of God and the Spirit of God lives in you? Do not be proud about following a human leader. We are all servants of Christ, and he gives to each person a job to do in His church. One person plants the seeds and another person waters them, but God makes the seeds grow. You are God's field and Gods building, not ours. This division among you comes from pride.

Mr. Wise' letter reviews how Man's Pride and Foolishness Divided All Men.

- When disagreement threatens the unity of the church body, plan a meeting to listen to those who want to speak. Then let the shepherding elders think about it, pray and recommend what to do.
- Do not recognize people as shepherding elders unless they are in fact shepherding others. This may be as leaders of a small group (1 Peter 5:1-4).
- Teach the elders the importance of listening to everyone and reaching an agreement prayerfully.
- Be sure that the course you recommend assures immediate obedience to any command of Jesus that relates to it, and that it is not simply to give more power and control to a few.

Exercise

Find in **Genesis 11:1-9**:

- In whose greatness did the people trust?
- What did God do to stop this proud rebellion against Him?

Learner discusses Mr. Wise' letter with his congregation, in his house, "People have been divided into different countries, languages and cultures for thousands of years. Now, in God's wisdom, He is bringing us together in the spirit in Christ, as was His original purpose."

One of the newly appointed elders adds, "We recently studied this in our small group. Jesus prayed for all of us in John 17. He prayed, 'Father, make them one, as you and I are one.' Jesus' prayer is answered in the universal church body, because we are one body in Christ. He is our head. We may not act like it, but that does not change the truth that the Holy Spirit unites us." They conclude the meeting with prayer for spiritual unity in Christ."

The next day Learner visits his student Helper and tells him, "A group led by Mr. Foolish has divided our congregation. Please come help me." They discuss how people who crave power and control often cause painful divisions. Helper tells his teacher, "I just read in 1 Corinthians that they had divisions also. I think we can find help in chapter 13, The Love Chapter."

Exercise

Find in 1 Corinthians chapter 13:

- Of what value are our gifts if we do not practice them in love?
- What are the things that love is?
- What are the things that love is not?
- What things does love do?
- What things does love not do?

As they travel back to Learner's house, Helper comments on what they studied, "If we practice our spiritual gifts in pride

instead of love, the gifts are useless. God puts love in our hearts, making us care about the interests of other people. He gives us power to forgive them. Love is not what we feel, but what we do. We can treat people with love by faith, even if we do not feel like it. Sometimes it takes time for our feelings to match up with our resolve to love.”

Learner prays, “Dear God, forgive me for my resentment against those who are divisive, and give me courage to deal with them with firmness and love.”

The next day Learner and Helper visit Mr. Foolish to plead with him to stop causing division. Mr. Foolish quickly changes the subject. He blurts, “Learner, some of your people are not serving the needy like you told them to. You are letting them undermine your authority! Call a meeting and tell them to obey or leave! They are the ones who cause division in the church!”

How to Handle Differences of Opinion in the Congregation

Learner tells Mr. Foolish, “We do not avoid division by using such drastic measures. Let me tell you the story of the divided kingdom. King David loved God with his whole heart, and God promised him that his descendents would rule as kings forever. His son Solomon asked God for wisdom to rule Israel well, and he built God’s Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, however, did not care about God or God’s people like his father and grandfather had. He listened to the wrong advice and made a decision in A Meeting that Divided the Kingdom of Israel.

Exercise

Find in 1 Kings 12:1-19:

- What did the people ask king Rehoboam to do?
- Rehoboam had two groups of advisors. Which did he heed?
- What did the people do when Rehoboam refused to lessen their burdens?

The elders say, “Amen!”

Learner explains, “The first church in Jerusalem met every day both in the Jewish temple court and in their homes. They often ate together, shared their possessions and took care of the needy. They were like a loving family. The congregations in apostolic times often sent visitors to the other congregations to encourage them. They worked out their differences in love instead of criticizing each other. When the Gentile congregations followed different traditions, they still had fellowship with the Jewish congregations. They let each culture follow its own customs as long as they respected each other and obeyed Jesus’ commands. We can do the same.” They open the Scriptures and compare the differences between the Jewish church in Jerusalem and the gentile congregation in Cesarea, in Acts chapters 2 and 10. They also consider how the gentile congregations in Galatia differed from the Jewish congregations.

Mr. Foolish leaves, but Jacob confesses, “I did not know that the Bible allows for such differences to exist among the congregations. And I never discerned between methods that can vary and the universal, underlying commands that do not. So I am willing to follow the suggestion of the shepherding elders and accept Learner as my leader. His style is different from my former pastor, but I see now that this is not the important thing.”

Practical Work

- Plan ways to strengthen the fellowship for your congregation, and between congregations.
- You might schedule regular times for simply enjoying fellowship as a small group or the entire congregation, with games or other forms of diversion.
- Arrange for times of fellowship with other congregations, and serve them when they need help.

Learner tells the men, "I do not feel right about serving the Lord's Supper when we are in such disharmony. We have heard everyone's opinion. I am asking the shepherding elders to fast and pray and meet again to end the division."

A few days later the shepherding elders meet with Mr. Foolish and his followers. They pray and sing. Learner begs Mr. Foolish, "Please tell us exactly what changes you want to introduce in the congregation, besides replacing me as the main leader."

Mr. Foolish starts to speak, but Jacob interrupts him to say, "Let me be honest. Most of us do not want what Mr. Foolish wants. He wants us to name him as pastor of this church as soon as Learner is removed, even though he also lacks credentials from an academic theological seminary. What we really want is for us to follow the system of my former church. We like their style of worship. They have great sound equipment they often rent the stadium to hold big evangelism meetings, with famous singers and professional musicians."

Mr. Foolish adds, "We lack that kind of excitement here. I believe that all of the churches in this entire area should conform to the same policies and methods, for the sake of unity. We should do everything exactly like Jacob's former church."

All of the shepherding elders protest at once. Learner explains what he has learned from the two disagreements in Acts 15. He says gently, "I am glad to see that this is not a disagreement about Jesus' commands. This is a disagreement about different ways of doing ministry. The preacher you like uses different methods to evangelize. I do not have his gifts. Our congregation is not wealthy enough to adopt their methods. Our method of evangelism works well in our community. Our elders and most of the people prefer to continue using the methods here that God has been blessing. They are easier for our people to follow. We do not criticize the people of Jacob's former church who follow their preacher and do things his way. We do not ask them to change. Almost all of us agree on this now. Let us ask each other for forgiveness for criticizing one another simply for desiring different methods."

Mr. Foolish listens to Learner and Helper without interrupting, then says, "Thank you for visiting me and explaining this. I will think about what you said."

Helper returns to his home and Learner goes to his woodworking shop to think things over. He finds that sometimes it helps to work with his hands while he meditates on God's Word. He prays, "Father, help me deal with the division wisely." He recalls what Mr. Wise taught him about how Two Congregations Settle a Dispute. He thinks about how Paul and the other apostles handled a problem that had divided the church in Antioch.

Exercise

Find in **Acts chapter 15** how the leaders of two congregations dealt with their different opinions:

- Did the leaders let everyone speak to tell their side of the dispute?
- How did Peter show respect towards the Pharisees who disagreed with him?
- Where did James find an answer to the disagreement?
- Did God help them all agree on their decision? If so, how?
- Did the Jewish Christians force the Gentiles to follow all their customs?
- When Paul and Barnabas started their next missionary trip, what caused them to work separately, with two task groups instead of one?

Helper returns to help Learner deal with the division at the next meeting in his house. Learner says, "Acts 15 reveals that people serve God in different ways. Unity in the church of Christ does not mean that every believer or every congregation has the same spiritual gifts, the same opinions or the same practices. We do not force them into conformity. Conformity is not unity. We command people to do only the commands of Christ and His apostles. There was a serious division in the church at Antioch. The Pharisees

insisted on many other commands as if they had the same authority as God. The church needed help from another church.”

Learner reads parts of Acts 15 and asks Helper to comment. He explains, “Paul and Barnabas traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem and worked together during this meeting to explain how God had accepted the Gentiles into the church without making them follow Jewish customs. The main leaders in Jerusalem were Peter and James. They listened carefully as the people expressed their opinions, without interrupting. Then, without criticism, they showed the people in Scripture and with the Holy Spirit’s power that God had freed the Gentiles from Jewish customs. The leaders listened first, then spoke the truth in love. The Pharisees finally agreed and submitted to the others and they all accepted the decision. God healed that division.”



Several people say, “Amen!”

Helper continues. “Later, however, Paul and Barnabas disagreed on how to do ministry. They dealt with their disagreement privately, without gossiping or criticizing each other. They respected each other’s opinions and agreed to practice their spiritual gifts separately. God blessed the work of both, as they went separate ways with two teams instead of one, to encourage congregations and start many more new ones.”

The Difference Between Commands and Methods

Learner’s people want to do the right thing and listen carefully as he explains, “Let us consider the two disagreements in Acts 15. The first one was about the authority of Christ’s commands for His church. The second disagreement was about methods of applying these commands. Paul and Barnabas disagreed on of organizational issue. The church is united under the authority of Christ’s commands. But Christians are free to adapt different methods of applying them in different ministries, according to their spiritual gifts. Divisions come when we confuse the levels of authority for Christ's church. His commands are the top level; we always obey them. But the methods we practice to obey these commands can vary widely.”

The discussion continues for a long time. Mr. Foolish and his followers do not listen to the others. They keep criticizing Learner. Mr. Foolish is their main voice and he keeps saying, “Learner is a good man. But he lacks education and he has no diploma from an accredited theological institution. So we cannot be sure that he is teaching us the whole truth.” A few others sit by him and repeat the same thing.”

Learner says, “We have not come to a full agreement by everyone here and I see that many of you are growing tired. Those who want to leave may do so.”

The women and young people leave. Only one man, Jacob, continues to agree with Mr. Foolish. He used to attend the church of the cousin of Mr. Foolish and recently moved into Learner's community. Jacob says for the third time, “I think we should do everything the same way as the church I used to attend.”