

Now What? 3

In the last two Sundays since we celebrated resurrection Sunday on April 8, we have studied the health and growth of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. We read in the first few chapters of the phenomenal numbers of people being saved and added to the church.

Health/growth factors:

1. **Resurrection** (convinced of it, testified and preached it)
2. **Fill with the Spirit**(natural consequence of obedience, worship, service, giving, loving God first and most.....)
3. **Love, integrity, and generosity**(unique Christian culture)

As the months and years went by and the church continued to grow and spread, can we find any more strong health factors? What kept the church strong as it grew? What caused the church to spread so rapidly from strictly a local phenomenon in Jerusalem to a world impacting movement in just a few decades?

Health/growth factors: **Ministry/leadership structure-**

It is clear that in the beginning, while the church was still centered in and around Jerusalem, that the apostles led every aspect of the work and ministries of the church. The original eleven had been trained by Jesus personally.

There were once again 12 apostles with the addition of Matthias chosen during the waiting period before Pentecost. Other lay leaders may have been in place but they are not mentioned so we can assume their role was minimal at most.

But eventually, with the addition of literally thousands of new believers being added to the church in a very short time, the need to start and expand ministries, in and out of the church, and to properly administrate them became a necessity. This necessity was realized out of, you guessed it, another “issue” that had come up in the church.

1. Deacons

¹ In those days, as the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.² Then the Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, “It would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to wait on tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. ⁴ But

we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry.”⁵ The proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch.⁶ They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.⁷ So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.⁹ Then some from what is called the Freedmen’s Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and disputed with Stephen.¹⁰ But they were unable to stand up against the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he spoke. Acts 6:1-10 (HCSB)

Remember this widows ministry was being funded by the sacrificial gifts of people like Barnabas who sold property and possessions. There was no government run social security or welfare system. Most widows relied on their own families to support them. But, if there was no family, they had to resort to

begging if they were not able to earn any kind of income. Thus arose a great opportunity for the church, in a unique way, to touch lives in the community: widows with no families would be supported by the church. But how would this be implemented?

Apparently, to start with, this first reported ministry of the church was administered by the apostles and/or volunteers (layman). It apparently wasn't real well organized as revealed in the fact that some widows were being neglected. It may have been accidental or maybe on purpose. There may have been some prejudice in the church which led to the Hellenistic Jews being neglected.

There is no exact knowledge as to the difference between the two groups but likely there were some language and cultural differences that probably caused some tension in the early church. It is interesting to note that all seven of the men chosen to oversee the widows ministry had Greek names. They were thus likely more closely associated with those who made the complaints.

What came out of this, scholars virtually unanimously agree on, is the initiation of the deacon ministry. They were chosen to lead in serving, waiting on the tables of the widows, so that the apostles, the forerunners of our elders or pastors, could devote themselves to "prayer and preaching." Thus a distinct leadership partnership was developed. The deacons primarily carried out this and presumably other ministries while the apostles focused on preaching the good news.

Who ran the church? Jesus! Certainly we can see that individuals within the auspice of their called/assigned ministry

exerting servant leadership. But you will fail to see throughout the book of Acts is someone claiming to be in charge or running the church. Leaders from the top down were servants after the model of Christ.

28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many.” **Matt**
20:28 (HCSB)

Deacons don't run the church, neither do pastors. Jesus is the head! By far most of the conflict and division that has plagued the church through the centuries has been caused by those who presume upon themselves more authority than scripture allows. Jesus said “all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” We would all be wise to remember that!

2. Pastors

The term or title apostle as used in the New Testament means one who is sent and is used almost exclusively of the twelve plus Matthias and Paul. It is not applied to any other group of leaders in the church beyond Paul.

It is quite clear that while the church was centered solely in Jerusalem that the apostles, the original eleven plus Matthias, served the pastoral/elder roles of the church. But once the church began to scatter through persecution and intentional evangelistic, church planting, missionary efforts, we see that the apostles, including the new apostle- Paul, began to appoint “elders” to serve in the pastoral role in local congregations that

had been established. The apostles continued to serve as overall or regional directors of the ministry.

The word pastor is only used once in the entire New Testament. (Eph 4:11) So if we are going to find a biblical basis for the role of pastor in today's church, we must search other names or titles to justify and define this position. "Elder" is by far the most common title used to describe those appointed to pastor and oversee the local congregations.

²⁷ In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the time of Claudius. ²⁹ So each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 11:27-30 (HCSB)

²¹ After they had evangelized that town and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the hearts of the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith, and by telling

them, “It is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God.” ²³ When they had appointed elders in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. ²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. Acts 14:21-24 (HCSB)

¹ Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved!” ² But after Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, they arranged for Paul and Barnabas and some others of them to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem concerning this controversy. ³ When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, explaining in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they created great joy among all the brothers. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some

of the believers from the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses!”⁶ Then the apostles and the elders assembled to consider this matter.

Acts 15:1-6 (HCSB)

¹⁷ Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: “You know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time— Acts 20:17-18 (HCSB)

²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ And men from among yourselves will rise up with deviant doctrines to lure the disciples into following them. ³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day

for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. Acts 20:28-31 (HCSB)

It is clear that as the church grew and new churches were started in other cities that the apostles time and energy were being spread thinner and thinner so they began to appoint local elders or pastors. It is reasonable to assume that their duties were very similar to that of the apostles, primarily prayer and preaching. Also some specific duties were revealed.

Elders (pastors):

(assume) **pray and preach** the resurrection

Received offerings

Assigned to a specific **local congregation**

Shepherd the church (love, care for, guard, minister to....)

Teach/preach doctrine (disciple believers) Timothy qual.-
apt to teach

On guard, alert- spiritual defender- stand guard, watch,
defend against Satan, evil, world

Though these passages are not thorough or detailed, we can pretty easily draw from them that the elders (pastors) fulfilled the apostolic role at the local level. These pastors, with the oversight of the apostles and partnership in the

shepherding/pastoral role with the deacons, provided a balanced and thorough approach which resulted in continued church health and growth.

Today, if we have any interest in following after the biblical, early church model and experiencing the same level of health and growth, we must operate under the same leadership structure. The worst and most deplorable abuses of the church over the centuries has been at the hands of individuals, pastors, deacons, or other self-prescribed church leaders who usurped authority and power that was not theirs to wield. It belonged to Christ.

We all, pastors, deacons, and all members of the body of Christ must put on the mind of Christ and model His leadership style.

25 But Jesus called them over and said, “**You know that the rulers of the Gentiles dominate them, and the men of high position exercise power over them. ²⁶ It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many.**” **Matt**
20:25-28 (HCSB)

When and if we all have the mind of the servant leader Christ, there will be peace, unity, harmony, and love in the church. We will be a strong and healthy church. We will understand God's purposes and be compelled to fulfill them. Making and teaching disciples will be an ongoing evidence of this health and unity and even daily people will be added to the church. The world craves and will be drawn to this kind of love, integrity and generosity no matter which century they live in.

We don't need dictators. We need imitators (of Christ). We don't need bosses. We need foot washers. We don't need CEO's. We need slaves. We don't need judges. We need compassionate care-givers. We don't need church police. We need holy nurses.