

This is the essence of spiritual leadership: sheep following a shepherd because they know and trust him. This kind of trust and allegiance can be gained only one way – by a shepherd touching his sheep, carrying them, handling them, tending them, feeding them – to the extent that he smells like them.

Dr. Lynn Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep*,
(Howard Publishing, 1997) p. 17

Dave,

Deb and I regard The Board of Elders' collective and individual efforts and dedication to Christ and His church with the highest respect and admiration. It's difficult to imagine the countless hours and effort that the Elders at Harvest have sacrificed while building this corner of God's kingdom. Please accept our personal and heartfelt thanks not only for the work that you've done for God, but also for the labor that you've expended on the behalf of everyone in the Harvest family.

Almost everything has changed in the years that we've been attending, except for the dedication to excellence in the fulfillment of Harvest's mission. Most changes have been exciting, and some have been a little scary to watch unfold, but until recently, we've never worried about changes to our foundational underpinnings. We write this because, we fear that something fundamental, and essential to our corporate wellbeing has changed. Please don't regard this as "scolding" or "grumbling", and please also realize that we have no desire to wear the "Chicken Little" label or be mistrusted and disliked by the Elders, but we are sincerely troubled and frightened by some things that we see, hear, and have experienced, and desire only to alert you to what we believe has happened, is happening, and will eventually happen if we are correct.

For well over a year, Deb and I have been very troubled by what we see as a collective drifting, by the elder board away from the rest of the body of the church at Harvest. While some elders remain visibly "hands-on" and in direct ministry to people, sadly many no longer are. We recognize that Harvest's rapid growth has drastically expanded the scope of and number of the Elders' responsibilities, making it a practical impossibility for the you [the Elders] to maintain close relationships with our entire church family, but over the course of the past 3-4 years we've also noticed a marked decrease in personal interaction between many of the elders and the body. We've also noticed a decrease in the sharing of meaningful information about the thought processes and discussions that have impacted Harvest's long term plans, goals, strategic objectives and finances, along with a decrease in the formal and informal solicitation of godly counsel from the body. With these observations in mind, please accept the following in the spirit of love and concern in which it is offered.

While neither Deb or I in any way question the Elders' personal or corporate integrity in relation to their motives or of any specific decision or act by the board, we are concerned that a continued drift away from your brothers and sisters will promote a lack of familiarity on both sides that will inevitably degrade the closeness of our fellowship, and

create a schism between the leaders and the led. This “drift” we believe will also ultimately, erode your collective accountability to the body leaving you [the Elders] unnecessarily vulnerable to attack from the evil one.

While we in the body are called to submit to your authority and to follow your leadership, it is never suggested anywhere in Scripture that this submission be unquestioning or without any reservation. In the book *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch eloquently addresses this point when he writes, “The requirement to submit, however, is not meant to suggest blind, mindless submission. Nor does it suggest elders are above questioning or immune from public discipline. (1Tim. 5:19 ff. The elders are most assuredly answerable to the congregation and the congregation is responsible to hold its spiritual leaders accountable to faithful adherence to the truth of the Word.”

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis and Roth 1995) p. 292

“The goal of the elders AND (emphasis our’s) congregation should always be to speak and act as a united community. Both the leaders and the led should take the time and make the effort needed to work and pray TOGETHER (emphasis again our’s) to achieve this oneness of mind. This means that elders must inoculate themselves against aloofness, secrecy, or independently seeking their own direction. Godly elders desire to involve every member of the body in the joy of living together as the family of God. This requires a great deal of free and open communication between the elders and the congregation.”

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*,(Littleton, Colorado: Lewis and Roth 1995) p. 294

(Please note that in this letter, we will most frequently cite the above noted book, since it is our understanding that many on the Elder Board are familiar with it and have recommended its reading.)

Dave, we’re not suggesting a change to congregational government, only regular, open, and frank communication. Harvest is blessed with an abundance of godly men, many, who have walked with the Lord for many years, and collectively possess a treasure of godly wisdom that should be mined. Strauch writes, “ To be faithful to the Holy Scripture and God’s plan for the local church, we must open the pastoral leadership of the church to all in the church who are called by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) and meet the apostolic qualifications. Although such a plan may be abhorrent to the clerical mind- set, it represents an authentic, apostolic mind-set.” According to the New Testament, the elders of the church are ALL the men of the local church who desire to lead the flock and are scripturally qualified to do so.”

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis and Roth 1995) p. 73.

While not everyone is either qualified or called, we believe that God has provided many men in our body who do belong in this group. As far as I can tell, the Board of Elders is roughly the same size now as it was when there were 100 believers attending Harvest. The scope of the Elder's work has grown with our numbers, but the number of Elders, hasn't followed. To foster church growth, but not expand the number of Elders results in a pyramidal structure, that seems clearly antithetical to Christ's model of shepherd leadership.

If there is no scriptural, numeric limitation to the eldership, what (in theory) restricts us from expanding the board? Expedience? Custom? Just for an example, John Piper's church has a weekly attendance of roughly 3400, but has an elder board of 30. Are we to surmise (based on the numbers alone) that God blessed Bethlehem Baptist Church with more men who meet the biblical qualifications for eldership than Harvest? Or are we to presume that Harvest is in a distinct category, where conditions dictate a different model? We sincerely don't know, but are concerned.

Let me state clearly, that we applaud the Elder Board's decision to create the office of Flock Leader in order to expand and extend pastoral care to those in our body who were before not readily reachable, however, even those who have been appointed to this position aren't generally in closer contact with the Elders, kept any better informed on matters of church business or approached more often for their counsel than those whom they serve. Sadly, it seems that while pastoral ministry has been extended to more people in the body, direct ministry by the Elders to our "under-shepherds" has not.

We're deathly afraid that as a body we are trending toward some sad and unnecessary problems; specifically, a permanent, obvious stratification within our body, and loss of Elder accountability. While we don't expect the Eldership will voluntarily elect to expand itself anytime soon, we can only hope that sincere efforts will be made to avoid these pitfalls by regularly communicating timely and meaningful news of your plans, thought processes, problems, frustrations, successes and failures to the body, instead of largely restricting communication to major "after the fact" announcements and the issuance of praise reports. We also hope and pray that the Elders will seek godly counsel from those in the body (but not on the Elder board) who have been gifted by God to build His church, and may any given moment be uniquely positioned and equipped to serve.

We all desire to be obedient to the ordained authorities in the church, but our obedience must be clearly defined biblically, and be an informed and willing act by the members of the body. If obedience is demanded of the body without clearly representing to the body the biblical nature and reasons for the request, the result isn't voluntary obedience, its servant-hood. Please don't ask us to blindly follow. Please explain your decisions, and arrive at them in the open whenever possible. Withholding information unnecessarily for the sake of expedience is often construed as willful misrepresentation and dissemblance,

suggesting and promoting mutual mistrust and division. We're all on the same team. Yes, there will be dissention, but God ordained that when he gave us free will. God never deceptively manipulates us in order to get His way, and neither should we.

“There probably is a short list of things that are in our control that create significant erosion of the platform of respect. Near the tip of everybody's list needs to be the lack of integrity. (Real or perceived) People expect us to be honest in our words, relationships, and promises. And while few of us would be directly dishonest, honesty goes deeper than simply being truthful in our words. An honest person has a life that lives up to the truths that he proclaims. Honest people deal squarely and in an aboveboard way with money. They do not use the truth in ways that manipulate and serve their own purposes, nor do they withhold information to advance their own agendas. People will perceive us to be dishonest when we refuse to admit that we're wrong, promote ourselves without warrant, and take credit due to someone else. If a shepherd has obvious gaps in his integrity, respect will soon be undermined. It's difficult to respect someone you cannot trust.”

Dr. Joseph Stowell, *Shepherding the Church*, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1997) pp 106,107

John 15:15 “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

Stratification Within the Harvest Church Body

Dave, it seems clear to us that somewhere along the line, an “upper-class” formed at Harvest. While we understand that service to God can, and should bring influence, sadly there are apparent instances where influence has been gained instead by wealth, association and position alone.

Matthew 20:25,26a “Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.”

Without notable exception, stratification in any organization is followed by favoritism. It does exist at Harvest, and we've seen it, personally, and up close. We have rules, but they're often not applied evenly, and when ignored or abruptly changed, no explanation or apology is offered. We're reminded of George Orwell's “Animal Farm”. The first of seven commandments painted on the barn door, was “All Animals Are Created Equal”. Later, after “stratification” had occurred, a post-scriptum was added to the barn door, “but some animals are more equal than others”. The surest way to undermine authority, and make rules apply to no one, is to have them applied unpredictably and inexplicably. Even the mere appearance of favoritism can and will more often than not have this effect.

"We must be constantly on guard against favoritism, against giving preferential treatment to some and ignoring others. We live in a society that plays favorites. It's easy to give

special treatment to those who are gifted, intelligent, rich, or beautiful without realizing what we are doing. We can also fall into the trap of deliberately working against people we happen not to like."

Bruce Barton, David Veerman and Neil Wilson in their commentary on I and II Timothy and Titus in the Life Application Commentary

"Nothing stinks more in the local church than the smell of politics. No skunk stands out more clearly and lingers longer than the smell of spiritual politics."

Pastor David Cofield, 1st Baptist Church Center Star, Killen, AL

"Moreover, in the worship of the church the leaders are never seen as dominating. Instead, a pattern of multiple participation by the congregation seems to have been the mark of all apostolic churches (see Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph 4:11-16; 5:19; Col 3:16; Heb 10:24-25; 1 Pet 4:10-11), regardless of their geographical location (see 1 Cor. 4:16-17; 11:16; 14:33). The New Testament teaches that the congregational meeting is to be a place where all Christians exercise their spiritual gifts and stimulate one another to love and good deeds. There is no division into two classes of people: clergy and laity. In addition, the leaders in the congregation did not take upon themselves honorific titles that might set them apart from the rest of the "saints."

David Alan Black, Professor of Theology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

"There were prophets, teachers, apostles, pastors, evangelists, leaders, elders, and deacons within the early church, but these terms were not used as formal titles. For example, all Christians are saints, but there is no "Saint John." All are priests, but there is no "Priest Philip." Some are elders, but there is no "Elder Paul." Some are pastors, but there is no "Pastor James." Some are deacons, but there is no "Deacon Peter." Some are apostles, but there is no "Apostle Andrew." Rather than gaining honor through titles and position, New Testament believers received honor primarily for their service and work (Acts 15:26; Romans 16:1, 2, 4, 12; 1 Corinthians 8:18; 2 Corinthians 8:18; Philippians 2:29, 30; Colossians 1:7; 4:12, 13; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:1). The early Christians referred to each other by personal names—Timothy, Paul, Titus, etc.—or referred to an individual's spiritual character and work: "...Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 6:5); Barnabas, "...a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith..." (Acts 11:24); "...Philip the evangelist..." (Acts 21:8); "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3); "Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you" (Romans 16:6); etc. The array of ecclesiastical titles accompanying the names of Christian leaders today is completely missing from the New Testament, and would have appalled the apostles and early believers."

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis and Roth 1995) p. 259

“One of the things these texts do is cause us to put safeguards around the exercise of leadership at Bethlehem. Let me mention some of them. Some are explicitly Biblical; others are matters of wisdom that have grown out of years of spiritual experience.”

“The council must consist of twice as many lay elders as vocational elders. This is not prescribed in the Bible. It is just another check on the potential abuse of power by those of us who have a lot of influence by virtue of our teaching roles.” “Safeguards Around the Exercise of Leadership at Bethlehem” (Informational document written by John Piper, and published by Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN)

Loss of Elder Accountability

In small groups that where I've [Jeff] been a member or a leader, I've always been taught, and have taught some form or another of the following two axioms as they relate to personal accountability:

#1 “You’re being lied to son, and it’s an inside job.” (Jer. 17:9, Prov. 14:12, Prov. 18:1, Heb. 4:12,13)

#2 “The evil one ONLY works in the dark, and anything that you choose to keep there, he WILL without exception use against you.” (John 3:19, John 7:4, Acts 26:18, James 5:16, 1Peter 5:8)

Short form; you can’t and shouldn’t unreservedly trust your own counsel, and whatever sins that you choose (personally or collectively) to keep hidden, will eventually become the evil one’s weapon of choice against you. (It should also be kept firmly in mind that even non-sinful things that are kept hidden may go bad in the dark.)

No matter who we are, we are subject to temptation and self-deception, individually, and collectively! If it isn’t wise to trust your own counsel individually, you [the Elders] shouldn’t (without adequate accountability and counsel provided by God and enabled by transparency to the congregation) trust yourselves corporately either.

We teach our small groups that it is unhealthy to become “too comfortable” and “too familiar” because this leads to an avoidable erosion of accountability that exposes us to attack. In time, every static, closed, group becomes somewhat blinded or inured to the peccadilloes of its members, and loses some of its “edge”. We’ve never heard or seen any exceptions to this principle.

“Privatism works against the nature of the church as a community and militates against the functions of discipline and accountability.”

Dr. Joseph Stowell, *Shepherding the Church*, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1997) p. 29

We also teach in our small groups that there is safety in numbers, and to be safe we must stay close to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Lions and wolves hunt on the edges of the flock, not in the center, and the same applies to Satan. The Elders need the support and protection of the body as much as anyone else, and by staying close-by and transparent, [to the body] the congregation can watch out for your souls, as you guard and instruct ours.

If the Elders grow increasingly insulated, unfamiliar, and distant from the body they will unavoidably become less accountable. Over the past few years, the “board” has moved largely toward appointing a majority of “vocational elders”, men with unquestionable academic and spiritual credentials, sterling characters, and amazing talents, but sadly limited in long-term, strong, meaningful personal relationships within our local body. Also, no matter how noble, godly and disciplined they are, because of their vocational relationships within Harvest, these men sometimes face conflicting loyalties and imperatives that can be successfully exploited by the evil one.

Without doubt Dave, there are valuable “practical” advantages to “vocational eldership” and we’re not for a second suggesting that any member of our elder board would knowingly by action or inaction betray his trust, or ever refuse godly counsel or reproof, but the potential consequences of having a perpetual supermajority of vocational elders are nonetheless dangerous. Wisdom suggests that this arrangement be consciously addressed and weighed.

In our form of church government, perhaps the most powerful form of accountability to which the Elders (both individually and collectively) are subject, (apart from, your mutual accountability and ultimate accountability to God Himself) is the fear of shame resultant from public censure and rebuke. Please note that God apparently designed this disincentive to be most effective when the elder is well known by, and has close relationships in the local body. This mutual familiarity is what puts the shame in public rebuke. (1Tim 5:20) Without it, the elders collectively are left without this God-given protection. If you’re not well known by us, and you don’t know us well, and the local body isn’t your long-term church home, the potential pain and embarrassment is reduced, and so is the disincentive to sin.

Finally, please let us offer that it’s been our personal experiences that in addition to the above observations, distance and isolation are also the breeding grounds for nepotism. We all enjoy and work best with those we know and like, and with sufficient authority and autonomy we tend to restrict entry into our personal “domains”. Unchecked, in hierarchical organizations (including churches) this tendency eventually results in the formation of an elite class of individuals who are the focus of all meaningful influence in the organization. (Regardless of giftedness by the Holy Spirit that is present in the rest of the congregation) In our sincerely humble opinions, this is not the way that Jesus designed his church to operate.

James 2:8,9 “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality you commit sin, and

are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

Dave, basically what we're saying is that we're concerned that the crystallization of influence at Harvest has already resulted in an unbalanced and unhealthy situation that potentially will lead to suffering on the parts of many, many people and possibly to the embarrassment of Christ's church as represented by Harvest Bible Chapel. We don't believe that our pointing out these issues will either be news to you, or will prevent what we fear are imminent consequences for our body, but it's been burdensomely heavy on our hearts to step forward and speak out, and now we have. It is now our intention to lay this matter down, and not discuss or think about it anymore except in prayer for Harvest. We commit this to you in love, after over a year of thought, meditation and prayer, and hope that you can accept this message with the same spirit of brokenness and trembling in which we offer it to you. Please reflect and pray on these thoughts, and share them as you are led by the Holy Spirit.

In Christ,

Jeff and Debbie Richardson

Monday, January 31, 2005

Pro Agno et sanctis suis