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BUILDING ON FIRM FOUNDATIONS

REVISED CROSS-CULTURAL EDITION



TEACHING NEW BELIEVERS:
1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Titus

Trevor McIlwain

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1 TIMOTHY and TITUS

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First Printing 2010

Building On Firm Foundations: Volume 6: Teaching New Believers: 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Titus — Revised Edition

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312 W 1st St
Sanford, FL 32771

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ISBN Number: 1-890040-76-2

Printed in the United States of America

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Part 1



Preparations and Guidelines for
the Next Step in Phase 4

1

The Local Church and Its Leadership

The thick jungle was dripping with the morning dew. Mist shrouded the valley as the believers slowly wended their way along the narrow trails to the small thatched-roof church building.

A man sat at the front of the church, watching the little congregation gather. Once all the local believers had arrived, he stood to begin the meeting. He nervously leaned one elbow on the rickety lectern, balanced his broken glasses on his nose, and slowly began to turn the pages of his hymnbook, looking for a song with which to begin the service.

This was a special day for the small group of believers. Several elders from larger churches and I, the missionary, had come to encourage the congregation and to instruct them further in the Scriptures.

The man standing before them, and two others seated nearby, usually led a simple service each week. Although they did their best, it was painfully obvious that they lacked both the ability and the knowledge to be able teachers of the Word of God and shepherds of the flock. Therefore, although they were acknowledged as church leaders, they had not been appointed as elders.

Elders in the local church

God's plan for churches is that they be led by spiritually qualified men. The New Testament is clear about this. The apostles, Christ's direct representatives, were the leaders of the first New Testament church, established in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-4). As the Gospel message spread to other parts of the world and churches multiplied, the apostles or their representatives appointed men to lead each local body of believers.

Church leadership in the New Testament was always a team effort. The pastoral care of believers was shared by men in each church who qualified spiritually and desired to serve God's people in this way (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Paul taught those who trusted in Christ through his ministry to gather as assemblies of Jesus Christ. Then when there were men who demonstrated spiritual qualifications, Paul or his representatives appointed them to be the church elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). These men were called elders, because

they were spiritually mature (Acts 20:17). They were also called overseers, because their work was to supervise and guide God's household according to His Word (Acts 20:28). Elders were also responsible to shepherd, feed and protect the flock by teaching His Word (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

Churches without qualified elders

If you have been following the chronological teaching program, the church or churches to which you are now teaching Phase 4 may be at the same stage as the one I described at the beginning of this chapter. The baptized believers undoubtedly meet regularly to worship and to be taught God's Word, but they probably lack capable men to be appointed as church elders.

A common question missionaries ask: "Must a group of believers first have elders before it is considered a true church of Jesus Christ?"

Luke has recorded in Acts that, after Paul and Barnabas had preached the Gospel in Derbe, "... and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.' So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:21-23).

Note the order – The churches existed first, and then Paul and Barnabas "*appointed elders in every church.*" So even before they had elders, these groups of believers were accepted as assemblies which had been called out of the world to gather in the name of the Lord Jesus.

This is in keeping with Jesus' promise, "*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20). It is clear from the context of this verse that the Lord Jesus is speaking about a church (Matthew 18:17-20). Therefore, we can conclude that even if as few as two believers meet regularly to worship the Lord and obey His last command, they can confidently claim the promise, "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

The goal of all church planters and churches should be to have qualified local men who will lead the church according to God's Word. However, small groups of believers, who do not yet have qualified elders, should be encouraged to meet regularly and to put into practice as much of God's Word as they can in their circumstances.

Taking care of churches which don't have their own elders

When large numbers in a community turn to the Lord, there are many men who can potentially be trained to become elders. But, what can be done when there are only a few believers in a church? Can we expect to see qualified elders raised up from every little group of believers?

During my time as a missionary in Palawan, I often wondered if it was feasible to expect biblically qualified elders to be appointed over **every** little church.

When meeting with churches which had few members and no elders, I often said to myself, "How wonderful it would be if, after seeing people put their faith in Christ as Savior, I could just push a button which would produce capable church leaders for every church." However, as most church planters will testify, it is never that easy.

The aim of every missionary should be to follow the New Testament church-planting principles taught and practiced by the Apostle Paul. We should not only work to bring people to faith in Christ but also to see those believers faithfully taught the Scriptures and meeting regularly to worship as churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the missionary should never feel that his work is complete until the churches raised up through his ministry have been entrusted to the care of faithful and able leaders. What can be done until this is a reality?

Until elders are appointed, either the missionaries or other temporary leadership must provide the guidance and teaching the church needs. Paul trained men such as Titus and Timothy to care for churches until elders were appointed. Because there were no qualified men to oversee the churches in Crete, Paul left Titus there to teach and care for the churches until local men could be appointed as elders (Titus 1:5). Titus' position in Crete was only temporary. He was not appointed to a superior position of leadership over elders. His work was to continue only until qualified men were raised up in the local assembly.

When a number of small scattered churches without qualified leadership exist, the missionary may try to teach every group personally. I made this mistake in my early days as a missionary. The results of spreading one's efforts so thin is that it takes many years for the churches to be established and elders appointed. In many cases, the work is never satisfactorily accomplished.

If you have a group of churches without elders, I suggest that you devote most of your attention to the church in which men have evidenced the greatest hunger for the Word of God and potential for eldership. This may not necessarily be the first group of believers saved through your ministry, although, in many cases, it would be. Concentrate your efforts on teaching and discipling these faithful men to become elders.

Give them the responsibility of discipling men from other churches (2 Timothy 2:2). If the men from the other churches are not yet capable of doing all the teaching in their home congregations, then the men you are training should assist them. You, as the missionary, should also visit each of these other churches occasionally, assuring them of your interest and care for them and checking on the way the men in these other places are developing as leaders.

After the men whom you have been discipling have been recognized as elders, they should continue to teach and provide oversight for these other churches until local leaders are qualified for eldership. If perchance, because of the smallness of these other churches, they never produce leaders, then these elders whom you trained should continue to give them the leadership they need. The elders would then be doing a similar work to that which Paul assigned Titus – taking care of churches without elders until qualified elders are appointed.

Continue as a model and teacher for potential elders

In the introduction to Phase 2 (Volume 3), I advised you and your fellow missionaries to act as the elders of the newly-formed church. By doing this from the very beginning, you would be providing the role model of a pastor which future leaders could observe and follow. You would have actually taught the potential leaders many of the functions of elders through your example. Furthermore, if you have followed the suggestions in the introductions to Phases 2 and 4 (Volumes 3 and 5), you have already

given them opportunities to participate in the work of elders. Therefore, by this stage, they should have acquired some ability in:

- Leading a church service
- Participating in the evangelistic outreach of the church
- Training others in evangelism (Phase 1)
- Teaching new believers (Phases 2 and 3)
- Training other believers to teach Phases 2 and 3
- Sharing in the teaching program of Phase 4
- Visiting and discipling believers

Natural Process

Even before we began teaching Phase 1 to the Tala Andig people, the issue of appointing church leaders was on our minds. We expected that God would raise up a group of believers among the Tala Andig people, and that the time would come when we no longer lived among them. So the need for leaders was always important to us. We believed that our work among the Tala Andig would not be completed until there were church leaders.

Among the Tala Andig believers, there has always been a number of older men who, in a natural sense, would be great leaders. However, because these older men lived so long in Satan's darkness, they were hindered in their spiritual growth. They struggled in putting their past customs behind them and allowing the Holy Spirit to free them from the old ways of thinking. They themselves acknowledged that, even though they are believers who love the Lord and value their salvation, they are not suitable to take on spiritual leadership in the church.

Younger men, who had not been so long in the old system of thinking, were more open to change. So we began early to focus on the younger men, training them, and giving them responsibilities. Over a process of years, these younger ones have been filled with God's Word, instead of the old system and ways of doing things. This change in their thinking has happened gradually and naturally.

And just as gradually and naturally, these younger men took on the roles of leadership. It was very easy for us to officially recognize them as leaders before the church. We did not have to choose them; we just recognized them as the leaders who had already been functioning in that position.

If we as missionaries are in this job for the long haul, then we do not need to rush into officially recognizing people as leaders. We will be naturally training them and seeing them develop over a period of time.

– Jason and Shirley Birkin, NTM missionaries to the Tala Andig Tribe, Philippines

Even though these men now may have some ability in these areas, you will still need to continue training them by your example. Have them accompany you on visitation. Give them direct teaching. Allow them opportunities to do the work of an elder.

Your goal should be to see these men functioning as elders before they are recognized as such. In other words, the appointing of elders should be a public recognition of those who have demonstrated to all – by their godly example, leadership qualities, loving care for others and ability to teach the Word of

God – that they are God’s chosen leaders of the church. Those who are finally appointed as elders should already be doing the work of elders. Eldership is not an office in which to glory; it is a work to be done.

Leadership Abilities Surfaced

After Phase 1 had been taught and the first church among the Pumé had been born, it was plain to see that different ones who had leadership abilities were surfacing as we taught through Phases 2 and 3. We could see their concern for the others and their desire to teach and encourage. They would spontaneously share on different portions of Scripture. Yet, it was obvious that they needed training.

When we started to teach Romans, we asked who would like to be involved in helping others spiritually. About 12 guys responded. We started meeting with them every Thursday for a time of fellowship, teaching, prayer, and practical instruction. Another class was also started to help the men learn to handle the Scriptures along with the Bible lessons. They had lots of hands-on training, too. We almost always had them go with us when folks needed encouragement or when there was a married couple needing advice, or when we wanted to make sure folks were clear on water baptism. What a joy it was to work with these guys and see them grow.

– Merrill Dyck, NTM missionary to the Pumé Tribe, Venezuela

Appointing elders

If men are already functioning as leaders, appointing them as elders will not be a difficult or complex matter. Nevertheless, there are some points to bear in mind.

Do not appoint men who are not highly respected or those whose work has not already been accepted and appreciated by most of the church fellowship. Unless the people have confidence in the men appointed to be their leaders, they will neither confide in them nor willingly follow them. If you continually have to bolster support and respect from the church for the native elders, as soon as you are absent, there will be disunity and rejection of the appointed leadership.

It is unwise for missionaries to nominate men to be appointed as elders and then ask the believers if they agree with the nomination. Through fear of displeasing us, or even of displeasing God, the people may “go along” with our suggestions without genuine heartfelt agreement. This is a very real danger.

Another mistake is to leave the choice of leadership completely up to the church. Paul did not leave the churches in Crete to choose and appoint their own elders. He left Titus there for that specific purpose (Titus 1:5). According to Acts 14:23, Paul and his fellow missionaries appointed the elders in the churches raised up through their ministry.

Before elders are appointed, you should give the entire church comprehensive teaching from 1 Timothy and Titus. (Lessons for 1 Timothy and Titus are included in this volume.) During this time of teaching, encourage the believers to note those who are faithfully exhibiting the gift of eldership.

When you as a team are convinced that some men are qualified and therefore should be recognized, tell the church that the time has come for elders to be appointed. However, until you are sure you know the mind of the church on this matter, don’t mention the names of the men you are considering. Ask the believers to come and tell you who they think should be appointed. Have them state the reasons for their choice. This will help you discern who the people have already accepted as their spiritual leaders. It may also reveal the spiritual needs of individual church members. Some may favor a certain man just

because he is a relative, a friend, or a community leader. Others may not have understood the necessary qualifications of elders or the seriousness of the whole matter of church leadership.

Local Input Essential

The local church body needs to heartily affirm that the prospective elders meet the qualifications. There should be no real hesitations. Many times, the local church body and the unsaved community know what is going on behind the scenes whereas the missionary or local church leaders from another area may not be aware of those dynamics.

It is possible, for instance, that immature or carnal believers may be promoting clan loyalties in the church and thus may not be happy if a prospective elder from another clan is ordained. In the Lamogai tribe, and also some other cultures in PNG, as many as 5 or more clans can be represented in one village and thus in one local church. If people do not have a mature identity in Christ, they may be promoting their own family or clan perspectives in their choice of elders. It may take a while to work through issues like this.

The development of church leadership is a process. Men can continue to minister and function in the church even though they may not have been formally recognized or ordained.

– Mike Mikolavich, Church Planting and Cultivating Consultant, Papua New Guinea

While talking with those who come, help them to understand any wrong attitudes or misunderstandings regarding church leadership. If the problems brought to your attention are confined to a few individuals, limit your teaching to them. However, if the misunderstandings are widespread, give public teaching to correct the problem. A review of some lessons from 1 Corinthians, which deal with divisions in the church or the exalting of some teachers above others, may be suitable. (Lessons on 1 Corinthians are included in this volume.) It may be necessary to review the qualifications of elders from 1 Timothy and Titus. As long as there is confusion in the church about these matters, it is far better to postpone the appointment of elders. Teach them, and then allow the Holy Spirit time to deal with sin and correct any misunderstandings. When the people do understand and their attitudes have changed, you may wish to have them come once again to give their opinions as to who is qualified for eldership.

If you find that the general consensus of the church concerning those to be appointed is the same as your opinion, you must speak with these men individually to find out if they truly desire the work of eldership before naming them as nominees. Some men may not want to accept the position of an elder. They may fear that they will fail or that some members of the church will reject them. Encourage those who are reluctant, but beware of persuading a man against his will. Remember the adage, “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” He may be flattered to be nominated and temporarily boosted by your eagerness for him to accept the position. However, unless he desires the work out of sincere love for God’s people and because he is convinced that the Lord has called him to the work of an elder, it will not last (1 Timothy 3:1). As you talk with these men individually, impress on each one the solemn responsibility for which he is being considered.

After interviewing the church members and the nominees, you will know whose names you can place before the church. After naming the nominees, tell the believers that you are going to allow time for them to consider the matter. Impress again on the whole church the seriousness of church leadership.