

"Growth, Governance, and the Glory of God" – Part 1

Acts 6:1-7

Mark Vroegop

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1-7)

Igniting a passion to follow Jesus is more than a mission statement; it is a way of life that is powerful and attractive. Last week I received a phone call from a member of our church who shared with me the impact of our time in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

He is a business owner with two other partners who are not believers. The business recently received some income from a relationship that they have with another business in the city, and he was thinking about that new money through the lens of joyful generosity. He decided to share the principles from last week's sermon with his partners and ask them join him in giving every employee a bonus. They all agreed, and he was able to write a note to all of his staff, quoting 2 Corinthians 9:11: "...you have been made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion and this generosity will result in thanksgiving to God." His desire was that this gift would bring thanksgiving to God.

So think of what happened. God used the joyful generosity of a believer to speak truth into the hearts of some unbelievers, and the result was a financial blessing that will create gratitude and a glory to God.

Here's another one. This week our benevolence ministry was able to assist a young woman to get her gas turned back on. It was a pretty significant amount, about \$700. As she was waiting in line at Citizens Gas to pay her bill, she overheard another woman talking to the clerk. She had just given birth a couple days ago and was just released from the hospital. Her gas

was shut off and needs \$44 to turn it back on, and she didn't have \$44. The CPC member, upon hearing this story, realizes she has \$50 of cash in her pocket that she was going to use for groceries. She remembered the sermon and the M&M illustration from Sunday. She immediately knows what to do: she sacrificed her grocery money (because she had enough food to get by at home) and gave the money to this new mom. Obviously, the new mom is very grateful for her generosity.

Then, when it was finally the CPC member's turn at the window, the clerk tells her that they are waiving the \$150 deposit needed to turn back on her gas. So she now has a credit on her account. What she was so excited about was the fact if she hadn't given the \$50 to the other person, she may have missed how God was blessing her through that credit on her account. But since she wasn't so focused on her own needs, she saw how God was providing for her.

This is what I love about College Park. Igniting a passion to follow Jesus is contagious. You understand that, and I love how you respond to the Word of God. I love that you are inviting people to come worship with us. Right now we are averaging 15 people visiting the Coffee Talk Room every week. Next week you'll see 50 people joining the church and our present membership trend shows us on track to add 350 members in 2009. You may not know it but our single adult ministries as grown from doubled in size from this time last year. Our attendance has grown 25% in a year, and we are presently averaging about 2700 people on Sundays.

For the next two weeks we are going to talk about some of the implications of this for us as a church. This week I'm going to talk primarily about the subject of governance. Next week will be a message on the specific priorities that we've identified.

"Semper Reformanda" – Always Reforming

Many of you may not be familiar with the phrase "semper Reformanda." It was birthed out of the Protestant Reformation, and it means that the church should always be reforming itself. Let me explain why.

Churches have doctrine, programs, traditions, a culture, forms, and other things that make it unique. But the foundation of the church is Scripture, and "Semper Reformanda" is rooted in the belief that the Word of God is our guide for faith and practice. Therefore, the church must be continually looking at its doctrine, programs, traditions, culture, forms, and other things through the lens of the Bible. This is important so that two dangers are avoided:

1. Viewing or treating traditions or forms on par with the Bible (e.g., "Real churches have altar calls")
2. Assuming that way we've always done things is the most biblical or the most effective way to do it

Semper Reformanda is a commitment on the part of the church to continually examine how we do church to be sure that we are both biblical and effective. It is rooted in the Scriptures, and it is led by the Spirit in the application.

“We...have tended to fossilize the traditions and forms of the past, forgetting that the Spirit moves on and that the church is only true to its Lord when it allows itself to be broken on the anvil of the Word and be reformed again and again.”¹

What does that process look like? I found a helpful diagram in Gene Getz’s book, *Elders and Leaders*.² He identifies three lenses through which we must examine church ministry forms:

- **Scripture (= principles)** – The first is to examine what Scripture says and to determine what principles must be applied.
- **History (= lessons)** – The second is to look through the lens of history to learn from those who have gone before us. In other word we need to learn from the past so that we don’t repeat the same mistakes or attempt to discover again something that has already been found.
- **Culture (= insights)** – The third is recognizing that there is a cultural application of principles and lessons that we need to recognize. For those of you who’ve been on a Vision Trip, you’ve learned that there are different forms that are used in other countries. Culture never trumps Scripture, but it certainly is central to the application of it.

Therefore “semper Reformanda” (always reforming) is a process for us to continually examine our forms through the authoritative lens of Scripture and the informative lens of history, and the practical lens of culture. We need forms; they are helpful. But we need to continually examine them and make adjustments to be more biblical and effective.

Now I’ve said all of this to make one very important point: healthy churches continually work on reforming themselves. Churches in crisis don’t. So it is a sign of health and vitality that we can even talk about these things.

Adjustments in Acts 6

Now I want you to see how this played out in the early church. Acts 6 records an important moment in the life of young church in Jerusalem. In many respects it was a defining moment as their previous forms of ministry were challenged, and they had to determine what God was calling them to do. It was a time for reform.

¹ Dr. John Hesselink, “Reformed but Ever Reforming” – www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles, 2-16-206.

² Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders – God’s Plan for Leading the Church*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2003), 28.

Notice the following:

1. **Growth tested their forms (6:1).** *"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."* The problem was pretty simple: the church was growing and the result was a drop in ministry effectiveness. The complaint even had racial overtones – the ministry to the Greek widows was ineffective.
2. **Two solutions were offered: right priorities and right people (6:2-4).** *"And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.'" So there were two key things: right priorities and the right people.*

The apostles understood that it was their responsibility to create a new form of ministry³ in order to meet the needs of the ministry and to keep them on target with the right priorities. But in order to make it work they had to have the right people.

3. **Greater effectiveness was the result (6:7).** *"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."* The effect of the right priorities and the right people was clear – the church had an even greater influence. They discovered a creative way to be true to the Word and to be more effective.

Right priorities and right people – both are essential. Both are part of the process of continually reforming.

Right People, Right Ministry, Flexible Forms

The Acts 6 account teaches us a very important concept in the Bible regarding governance: we need right people, right ministry, and flexible forms. This means that the Bible doesn't talk a lot about the forms of leading a church, but it does talk about the right people and the right ministry. Let me show you this from a few places:

³ Were these men the first deacons? We are not sure. Their role would certainly fit the definition that we find later in the Pastoral Epistles, but Luke does not use the word for deacon here. It may be that the official office of Deacon developed over time, and this was the first instance of it. Paul, writing years after the Acts 6 event, may have been giving instruction for filling a role that began here.

Ephesians 4:11-12 – God has given people-gifts (e.g., apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers) to the church so that we can be built up. A church’s responsibility is to recognize those whom God has gifted and grant them the opportunity to use their gifts.

1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 5:1-4– These texts are helpful in five ways. 1) They give us two offices: Elders and Deacons. 2) They give us the spiritual qualifications of those serving in these roles (e.g., above reproach, husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, etc.). 3) They identify the differences in responsibilities: Elders are charged with leadership and teaching. Deacons are charged with serving. 4) They use different words to describe the same office – elder, overseer, shepherd/pastor (see Eph 4:12). 5) There is clear plurality of elders which means that the church was managed by a unified team of godly men.⁴

Right people and right ministry are essential for the life of the church. These are non-negotiable. There is a great deal of flexibility in other areas. A few examples:

- Leadership structure in the early church was flexible in form. The church of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Ephesus were organized the same. It appears that the church selected its own leaders. However Paul gives Titus some unique instruction for the churches in Crete (see Titus 1:5), telling him to appoint the elders.
- It is clear that plurality of elders still required primary leaders, although this was not commanded. Peter, James, Paul, Timothy, Barnabas, and Silas are all identified as leaders in various passages. Plurality allows for a leader of leaders.
- Ministry in each city and in various regions took on a unique flavor or strategy. Sometimes there were gatherings in the temple, sometimes in house-churches, sometimes in synagogues, and sometimes in cultural centers.

The point of all this is for you to see that there are some things that are non-negotiable, and there are other things in which there is flexibility.

What have we seen so far?

1. The church needs to be continually reforming
2. The church is protected by the right people doing the right things
3. The church needs to be flexible in forms

Let me translate that for us at College Park.

College Park Church is led by a congregationally appointed group of men called Elders. This group of men is comprised of staff Elders and lay Elders. These men are biblically qualified and

⁴ See also Acts 11:30; Acts 14:23; 15:2,4,6,22,23; 20:28; 21:18; James 5:14

are charged with the official and overall spiritual leadership of the church. There are many other men in our church who are elder-qualified and many who serve in spiritual leadership roles. However, there is a specific group that have been elected by the congregation to lead the ministry. We call those men Elders.

We also have pastors. These are men who are given the honor of devoting their energies, and they also serve on the Elder Council. So our Elder Council is comprised of Pastor/Elders (Staff Elders) and Lay Elders.

We are committed to mutual accountability and plurality. That means that we are in one another's lives. We have monthly accountability meetings on top of the monthly Elder meetings. Additionally we are committed to the principle of plurality which means that we might have different functions but we are all equally elders. Therefore even though I'm called the Lead Pastor, that doesn't mean I'm the CEO of the organization. It means that I am the primary teacher, vision-caster, and leader but there is a team mentality and approach.

Our Elders are very unified, but it doesn't mean that we all think the same on everything. There is a sweet balance of respect, love, and honesty. Our governance as Elders is going wonderfully well, and it is very important for you to pray for our Elders regularly.

Now we also have some areas of growth and clarification. The Elders have identified two governance items that we are working on:

1. Bringing clarity to title and roles with our Staff Elders, particularly regarding who is called a pastor
2. Bringing our constitution up to date with the present functions of ministry

We thought that it would be helpful for all of us to understand the various roles and responsibilities for each of our staff elders. And that is why we are asking you, on March 29, to approve the new titles.

In the course of considering these changes it became clear that at multiple levels the constitution has not kept up with the growth of the church. A constitution is a "form" and there are a number of things that we need to address in order to help us be more effective. We will talk about these during our congregational meeting.

However, it seems that the spirit of the constitution is such that the congregation should affirm those men who are serving as pastors. I don't know if you've noticed or not, but who is called a pastor is not consistent. We presently have some men who are ordained but are called directors. Some were voted on, others were not. All of them, however, are function in pastoral roles – they are leading, teaching, and shepherding people.

So our Elders are proposing that we begin a process of bringing the constitution up to date over the next year, and that we start that process by identifying who are pastors and their responsibilities. So let me walk you through the new titles and responsibilities.

The proposal is to identify the following men, who already serve as Elders, as pastoral staff.

Mark Vroegop – Lead Pastor
Joe Rice – Executive Pastor
Eric Anderson – Pastor of Worship
Don Bartemus – Pastor of Christian Education and Compassion
Joe Bartemus – Pastor of Theological Development
Nate Irwin – Pastor of Global Outreach
Doug Pabody – Pastor of Soul Care
Dale Shaw – Pastor of Local Outreach

A few months ago our Elders approved a process for licensure and ordination which identifies that a person who is licensed as a pastor has two years to complete their ordination process. Two of our men, Joe Rice and Dale Shaw, have not been ordained, and they have both begun the process of completing that process.

We presently have an open position that we are calling our Community Life position. That person will be responsible for Small Groups, Assimilation, and Worship2. And we want that position eventually to be a pastoral position as well.

Now some of you may remember voting on some of these positions before. Since much of this is new, we thought it would be good to lay this before you once again for the sake of clarity.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Growth creates a number of new opportunities and new challenges. Former forms of ministry and models of leadership are tested during these seasons. Our Elders are committed to continually reforming College Park Church so that we can be everything God wants us to be.

On our part, we are committed to:

- Maintain right priorities in our lives and the ministry
- Identify areas of growth and strategies for improvement
- Communication that builds unity and better decisions
- Prayerfully seeking God for wisdom

On your part, we need you to be committed to:

- Maintain right priorities in your lives and ministries
- Identify areas of growth and strategies for improvement
- Communication that builds unity and better decisions
- Prayerfully seeking God for wisdom

Yes, they are the same. And here is why: leading our church forward is all of our responsibility; we just have different responsibilities.

College Park belongs to Jesus. It is his church. He's the center. Governance means the right people in the right places to make the right decisions so that College Park can be what Jesus wants us to be.

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