

A Church in Harmony
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Brian R. Wipf

As I watch the proud Medford Marching Band at halftime during football games, I feel a little bad for the flute players. I've noticed something; they seem to always be tucked in the back. What are they doing back there? I can never hear them. As the trumpets and trombones blare their bold notes and as the percussion players pound away, it takes a trained ear to hear the high notes of the flutes.

So, I reached out to our own Mr. Wernberg to ask, "What's the deal?" And friends as we are, he took the time to teach me the structure and rationale of a marching band. How interesting. What I learned is that there is a rhyme and reason why all the band members do what they do, stand where they stand and follow who they follow. Big surprise. And it's all done to bring over 100 members of a band in harmony together. Some members of the band lead; others follow. Some seem to have a leading roles. Others don't. The flutes, Rob told me, support the trumpets, particularly on the higher end. Think how this could be construed: the trumpets get the main stage while the flutes merely help. That doesn't sound too glamorous. But when the big picture is what's most important, when all the band members (and their parents) care for something greater than their own glory, beautiful music is made.

This reminds me of the body of Christ and the harmony we are all working towards with one another. And like a band, the church has a particular structure with different elements, people and responsibilities. Some people seem to get noticed; others not so much. Some lead; others follow. But everyone is needed to make a joyful noise to the Lord.

The church's drum major is the Lord Jesus Christ. We march to his beat. We go where he leads us. He is our head; he is our True Pastor and Shepherd overseeing our souls.

And the Lord Jesus appointed a handful of section leaders to watch him, listen to him, follow him and pass on his wisdom, words and commands to the the rest of the body. These section leaders form a group called elders within the body of Christ. As we've been learning over this last month the church is to be led on this earth by a group of qualified and appointed men; they are to carry on - in flesh and blood - the shepherding ministry of Jesus for his church. While they need the ability to teach and manage the body, above all they are to be godly men of character.

But where does the church of Jesus Christ fit? How do Jesus Christ, his elders and his people make beautiful music together for the glory of God and for the good of others? Where does the church fit? That's our focus today.

To begin, I want to show you the cooperative spirit and experience of the early church from Acts 15. Revolutionary things were happening in the early days of the church. And I'm not

talking about the miracles and the crowds of people (as amazing as those were). I'm talking about the theological shift that was taking place. Acts 15 records this incredibly important decision by the church. You see, Paul and Barnabas just got done with their first missionary journey. What shocked the church is that it was Gentile people who believed the message of Jesus and Jewish people rejected it. What a surprising turn of events! You'd think the exact opposite would happen; Jesus was Jewish. He obeyed and upheld the Law of Moses. He said explicitly that he came for the lost sheep of Israel. But the Jewish people largely rejected Jesus. Instead, it was non-Jewish people who believed.

So, what does that mean, then? Do these non-Jews need to become Jews? Do they need to keep the Law of Moses like the people of Israel always kept the Law of Moses? Surely, they couldn't ignore the Hebrew Bible, could they? Acts 15 records the debate and the decision of the early church on this key matter.

Here's the short version of what happened: the apostles rightly persuaded the church that the burden of trying to be saved by keeping the law was a yoke of slavery for the nation of Israel for centuries. It couldn't be done; in fact, it wasn't supposed to be done. The law was supposed to drive Israel to God for mercy. Sadly, it didn't; it just made them hard and unrepentant. So, the decision was made: these new Gentile believers would not be required to keep the law of Moses; they would not have to get circumcised or obey dietary restrictions. No, what mattered is if they call on the Lord Jesus in faith. After the church's decision was made, the word needed to spread so that all the churches could practice the same thing. Now, that's a brief summary of what happened; as we read the story, listen to how all the various members of the band participated together. (READ Acts 15:1-22).

The unique way the church and the elders cooperated together is noteworthy. First of all, it seems that the church in Antioch was quite concerned and invested in this question. Vs. 3 says, "So, being sent on their way by the church..." It doesn't say the elders in Antioch or other leading men sent this delegation to Jerusalem. The church cared about these things. But what did the church do? They entrusted the matter into the hands of leaders. The church didn't make the trip up to Jerusalem; they didn't go. The church had trust in their elders and apostles of the Lord Jesus.

At the end of the debate we again see this cooperative relationship between the church and her leaders. Vs. 22 says, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers." The point that I want to draw your attention to is how every group in the body participated and was united together in the decision. We have the apostles and elders leading the way; their godly and sacrificial leadership was critical. But they didn't make this decision alone. We see the church was included and the final decision was in accordance with the wisdom and convictions of the body. Key leaders who were not elders were also tapped on the shoulders to send word the back to Antioch and no doubt to other churches as well.

Acts 15, in my view, shows us this beautiful song put together by everyone in the body as they respect each other and the roles God gave each of them. So, how did that happen?

Since we've talked at length about the role of the elders I don't want to spend time doing that now. But it's worth saying again that elders serve for the good of the body according to the direction of the Lord Jesus. They do not serve the body for their own good; nor do they serve the body in accordance to their own wisdom or opinions. Remember, Jesus is the drum major and the elders watch him for their leadership. And wise elders listen to the church, take advice from the church and seek to find common ground with the church as they follow Jesus' lead.

The church body has important roles, too. Hebrews 13 provides some of the most explicit teachings for the church in relationship to her leaders. Turn to vs. 7 (READ). So, the first action step a church body is to take in relation to the elders' leadership is *remembering*. The NT constantly tells us to remember Jesus Christ. But here we're told to remember our leaders. Remember means to call to mind, to pay special attention to. It doesn't mean to merely not forget, like don't forget to pick up some milk. Pay special attention to your leaders. Interesting. But in what way and why? The first reason is because leaders give you a good example to follow. "Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

There is fruit to a life of faith. Listen to Ps. 1:1-3 (READ). We have an entire book of the Bible, Proverbs, that describes the fruit of a life that fears God and walks in faith. That's what Heb. 13:7 is implying; consider the outcome of your leader's life and imitate the faith that got them there. Do you see and admire the harmony that exists in a leader's marriage? That didn't happen by accident; faith in Christ got them there. Do you respect the way an elder manages his home? That's the result of following the words of Christ. Do you wish you had financial stability like one of the elders? Again, that's the result of following the wisdom of Christ. Some of the wisest money managers I've known didn't earn a lot of money; but they managed what God gave them so wisely and were so content with their lot from the Lord that I want to imitate that example. If you want to experience that kind of life, imitate their faith.

I say this with great care and love for you, FBC: some of you keep struggling like you do because you won't learn from the example from others. Your pride won't allow you to humbly admit that you could use some help here or there; and pride won't permit you to ask for help from others. God gave you elders to give you an example of what it means to follow Christ. In the entire 12+ years I've been here - again, not perfectly - the men that I've served with give a pretty good picture of what it means to follow Jesus. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith in God. Where I'm still struggling, where I'm still failing to implement a faithful life, no, don't imitate that. So, it's not like you don't exercise some discretion. But by and large, our leaders set a good example to follow and Hebrews 13:7 tells you to imitate the faith you see.

The second command for the church is in vs. 17 (READ). The key commands in vs. 17 are *obey and submit*. Let's just walk through this section. First, why should a church body obey and submit to its leaders? The author answers that question by saying, "for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." It seems like the author at this point is appealing to his readers to consider their own well being (which he does again in the second half of the verse). It's almost like he's saying, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you." Here you have your elders and they are praying for you, they are serving you, they are sacrificing more than you know to teach you God's word and to give you an example to follow. Any and all of your elders will be there for you to help you be all that Christ is calling you to be. So, make sure you obey and submit to their leadership.

Or another example or illustration might be paying attention to your dentist. Here's your dentist, schooled and trained with more expertise about dental care than we could possibly imagine. And she's held accountable to the highest ethical and professional standards; if she doesn't comply she will lose her license. And your dentist lays out the plan for healthy teeth. She says, "Brush this way. Make sure you floss. Use this kind of mouthwash. Stay away from excessive sugary drinks. See me once a year." They give you all this information; but you don't obey any of their advice. Your dentist is there to take care of you; they have knowledge that you don't have. For your own good, obey your dentist. That's what the author is getting at. Elders are keeping watch over your soul.

To demonstrate just how much your leaders are working for your good the author finishes that sentence by saying, "as those who will have to give an account." God's leaders will give an account for their service. Believe me, that motivates your leaders. That puts a healthy fear of God in your leaders to do the job really well; that's the point. So, if your leaders are motivated by a healthy and right fear of God, you can have a sense of confidence that their work and leadership is for your good, which is all the more reasons to obey and submit to them.

The second half of this verse again appeals to your own sense of well-being. This verse ends by saying, "this would be of no advantage to you." Consider your own good, church! That's what the author is saying. What's no advantage to you? If your leaders serve with no joy because you keep refusing to follow their leadership.

Now, are these universal commands; meaning, are there any exceptions to these rules? Is there any time to disobey your leaders? Yes, of course there are reasons. If a leader is telling someone to do something immoral, that's a good reason to disobey. If an elder is teaching something false, that's a reason to ignore an elder's leadership.

An illegitimate reason to disobey would be because you simply disagree; you have a differing opinion. The elders say our facility use policy is this; well, you disagree with it so you're going to disobey. Your elders ask the church to wait to sign up for an event, but you don't want to wait so you sign up anyway. Your elders disapprove of a particular curriculum for your small

group, but you like it so you're going to use it anyway. If obeying and submitting to your leaders means anything, it means not picking and choosing what you want to obey.

When I first got married my father gave me this advice: out-serve Korby. Work to out-serve her. That's good advice for marriage, but it's also good for the church. The elders and the congregation ought to out-serve one another. On the one hand, elders serve by listening, humbly leading and teaching, giving a good example to follow. Never demanding their way because of selfish reasons, but always using their authority to serve the body. And a church should out-serve her leaders by receiving the teaching, leadership and example they are given. A congregation also shouldn't demand its own way, but instead trust the leadership that God has given her. And when we do that together, we'll be following our drum major Jesus really well and make beautiful music together.

Questions for the week

- What gets in our way of serving well in less prominent roles in clubs, teams, organizations or church? What's the danger of serving in prominent roles?
- What stuck out to you in the church's relationship from Acts 15?
- What do you want to do differently in the life of the church to bring more harmony to the body?