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FIRST BANK OF HEAVEN

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matt 6:19-21)

Jesus seems to have taken things that were being discussed, or things that he could see at the time, as the subjects of his parables. Perhaps it was so in this case. He was speaking to a large group of people. Possibly he had been listening to the news being spread, or his apostles had brought news to him. People have not changed that much over the centuries. The same things catch our attention today as then. So picture the following news story. Today it would be on the radio, television, or Kindle. Then it would probably be passed by word-of-mouth.

Capernaum News, 26 Adar 30 “Shovel Shears Sheepowner” Yesterday Yosef ben Shlomo was the richest man in Capernaum. Today he may still be the richest man, but his personal wealth is greatly reduced. The owner of the largest herd of sheep in Capernaum, ben Shlomo is the proprietor of the large house just east of the Roman amphitheatre. The house has been known for its interesting architecture, a combination of stone and stucco, that has been pleasing the eyes of local residents for a decade. Last night the stucco portion proved too promising of possibility for plunder. Unknown thieves, wielding shovels and picks, dug through the walls of Villa ben Shlomo and made off with clothing, jewelry, and a reported ten talents of silver. The thieves did leave Yosef a few moth-eaten tunics and some green copper coins.

It may have been just such a news story that caught his attention just before Jesus sat down to speak. And so we have the famous lines about putting treasure “where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.” He admonished his hearers that true treasure is not that which is temporary, but that which is lasting. An account in the bank is less important than an account in heaven.

Some might ask the value of an account in heaven. After all, you can’t spend it here. “In God we trust; all others pay cash.” The thing is, though, that God pays interest on our treasures invested with him, and that interest is not always in kind. One way to lay up treasure in heaven is to divest ourselves of some treasure here. But when we do, we get God’s interest. “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.” (Lk 6:38)

Jesus reminds us that we have to be active in our investment strategy. We have to be deliberate about what treasure we store, and where we store it. Some people shop around for a bank or credit union. Which has the best security record? Which pays the highest interest? Which gives the best gift for signing up for an account? (Do banks do that any more?) We have to shop for our treasury as well. Does the treasure just sit around gathering rust or dust? Can anybody beat heaven’s security system? No, in heaven nobody has been able to dig or blast through the walls.

One subtle idea of what Jesus said must also be addressed. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” If we lay up treasure here, we will not want to go home to God. But maybe the reverse is true as well. Where your heart is, there is your treasure as well. The one says your heart will follow your treasure heavenward. The other thought is we treasure those things we love. If we love money, that is the root of all kinds of evil. (1 Tim 6:10) If we love people, our treasure will be spread among them.

Imagine getting all of this out of a simple news story.

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NO ELDERS?

I have been reading a book about elders. The first thing I noticed about this book was that it was intended to convince Baptists to begin following the biblical pattern of “elders in every city.” (Tit 1:5) This was quite surprising, because in all my years I never realized that most Baptist congregations do not follow this practice. I knew that Baptists (and others) tend to call the preacher a Pastor, which is a term used for elders in the Bible. I knew that some of the pastors did not meet the qualifications of elders. I just never realized that they did not serve under or with men who did meet those qualifications and had been selected to wear the title of Elder/Pastor/Bishop (all three being designations for the same office). As I understand it from reading this book, the deacons in many Baptist congregations perform some of the duties of elders, without being so designated.

I am not writing this article to chide these Baptists. The author of the book I am reading does a pretty good job of that without my help. My point, rather, is twofold: pointing out that sometimes people who pride themselves on certain biblical principles (such as congregational autonomy) can miss the boat on others, and to look at some things that seem to have been essentials for the government of the early church that are sometimes ignored or overlooked in today’s churches.

Being right *and* wrong

Nobody is immune to that first point. Some denominations try to follow the scripture more closely

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than others, but none is inoculated against overlooking something important. In fact, any time someone emphasizes a particular doctrine, they may fall prey to ignoring others.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were sticklers for correct doctrine. They even built up traditions just to keep people from coming close to violating the Law. Jesus acknowledged that their teachings were correct, as far as they went. “Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, observe and do.” (Matt 23:1-3) The Pharisees emphasized strict obedience to doctrine, but in so doing

they ignored the spirit of the Law. “Ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.” (Matt 23:23)

There was a time (and still is, in some places) when the Church of Christ as a denomination was guilty of exactly what the Pharisees did. Preachers and everyday members could debate issues like immersion, instrumental music, and congregational autonomy with ease. The problem was that in so doing they neglected the issues of grace and mercy. Those issues are certainly important, but it does no good when debating them they alienate others with the “we are the only ones going to heaven” attitude.

Nor are the Churches of Christ unique in emphasizing one point to the exclusion of others. Where some argue baptism in a legalistic manner, others take the opposite extreme and argue salvation at the whim of God, regardless of the willingness or lack thereof on the part of the one being saved. When some assemble for group worship on any day of the week (but especially on Sunday) others go to the extreme of saying that the only authorized day for worship is Saturday. When some allow any means of raising funds for the church and seemingly any way of spending it, others will limit contributions to the church to free-will offerings only on Sunday and severely limit how those funds can be expended. Look at these examples. One thing you may see is that often a group becomes known more for their reaction to someone else than for their overall doctrine. Some would point to that as the fundamental difference between the Reformation and the Restoration Movement. One seeks to reform an already faulty doctrine; the other seeks to restore fully the original. Both are reactionary. The approach is different; modify a 2011 carburetor to fit a 1964 Dodge Charger, or find original parts to restore the vehicle. The advantage of restoration is that one looks at the whole blueprint and not at a part at a time.

Sometimes people overlook something in an effort to guard against the possibility of not being saved, or as the result of an error in doctrine. An example would be the baptism (although few actually immerse) of infants. The Bible clearly teaches the baptism of believers. However, some have developed the doctrine that people are born with the guilt of sin, and therefore in need of forgiveness from birth. They overlook the requirements of repentance and faith out of fear that their newborns will be forever lost. Others, perhaps, feared that if a nine-year-old, for instance, might have required salvation, why not baptize one a year younger. Arguing like Abraham did over the number of people required to save Sodom, one soon

comes to the idea that an infant should be baptized, “just in case.” Others yet, rejecting the necessity of baptism for salvation, turn it into a promise by the parents to raise the child in the faith. A valid doctrine then becomes something that Christians taught by the apostles would never recognize.

Congregational Government

Would those apostles recognize the way congregations are governed today? Governance today ranges from one extreme (congregational autonomy) to the other (a hierarchy based on the government of the Roman Empire). It ranges from open government (the “men’s business meeting” concept) to autocracy on either a congregational or hierarchical level. What is the biblical pattern?

There are two or three offices in local congregations that seem to be required in the New Testament. Paul told Titus to ordain elders (also called pastors/shepherds and bishops/overseers) “in every city.” Since it appears that most, if not all, cities had one congregation of the church, these elders would be limited in their scope to just the local church. There is no provision for bishops over multiple churches. The bishop/elder/pastor had responsibility for the Christians where he served, and no authority over any Christian outside of his city. As importantly, Paul expected every congregation to have elders. Even in a young congregation, Titus was expected to find men who met the qualifications of elders, as set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. These elders were responsible primarily for the spiritual oversight of the local congregation, although they may have also had some fiscal responsibilities.

Every deacon is necessarily a minister, since that is the meaning of the word, but not everyone called a minister held the office of deacon. If the elders are part of the local congregation, then so also are the deacons (Php 1:1). It is possible that some congregations can function without deacons. Paul said nothing about deacons in each city. However, if Acts 6 describes the office that developed into the deaconate, then most congregations would not function to peak performance without deacons. If elders have responsibility over the spiritual aspects of a congregation, the deacons appear to have the responsibility for the physical aspects. This might include distribution of food and money, but in a modern congregation would also include the maintenance of the physical plant (church building), as well as budgeting the distribution of the church treasury. Another translation of the word is servant. The deacon was a special servant to the church, and apparently only exercised leadership in getting others to help accomplish the specific work to which he was assigned.

A possible third “office” in a congregation is the evangelist. The word is only used twice in scripture, but in

both instances it appears to have been a title of an individual in a local congregation. The word means a bearer of good news; therefore it appears to be the office of preacher. There is nothing to indicate that this person held any leadership position in the church. His function appears to be limited to proclaiming the word, and perhaps the related functions of scholarship and encouragement. It was not his function to visit the sick (elders, James 4). He did not have the responsibility for designing church buildings or dealing with city inspectors (perhaps a function of deacons). Today many people expect the preacher (in some denominations called the Pastor) to be a combination elder/deacon/contractor/banker/counselor/jack-of-all-trades. This takes him away from his stated function of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. If he needs time to study so that he can preach more effectively, making him do all these other things reduces his effectiveness in his assigned duties. Some preachers today seem to feel that their responsibility is primarily to

Paul expected every congregation to have elders.

those in the congregation where they work. While all can benefit from the good news, the ones who benefit most from the duty of the evangelist would be those who have not yet heard or obeyed the word of God. A preacher who spends most of his time preparing sermons for the congregation rather than with the lost of his city is shirking an important part of his duties.

Some congregations try to function without any of these offices, or only with an evangelist. Committees replace the elders and deacons. Decisions are made by majority vote of all those whose names are on the membership rolls, regardless of their other participation in congregational life or the way they conduct their lives. This model of government leaves a congregation open to all kinds of error. It either encourages party divisions or rule by one charismatic individual. Such a congregation is not likely to last long as a church devoted to following the word of God.

Perhaps a congregation can do without deacons and evangelists. Probably they cannot. Yet in some denominations these are the essential governing offices. Elders are often overlooked, or considered an “if we later decide we need them” option. Their function of watching for the spiritual welfare of the church, of shepherding the flock, is the most vital of all the offices. Of what value is it if a church maintains a nice building, feeds the poor, and has a famous preacher, if in the process they allow wolves in among the sheep?

I LIFT MY HANDS

Lord, I lift my hands to You, Lord, to You my voice I raise. I will pro-mise to be true. I will give You all the praise. Lord, you gave Your-self for me; For my sins You came to die. You have set my spir-it free. Lord, I raise my hands on high So help me tell Your sto-ry And keep it fresh and new. Let o - thers see Your glo - ry In ev - 'ry - thing I do. Lord, my life is in Your view. I will walk in all Your ways. I will lift my voice to You. Lord, to You my hands I raise.

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "I Lift My Hands". It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The music is written in a simple, accessible style suitable for a church service.

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