



Editor's Note

Sometimes we're asked if ESN is open to suggestions for articles. The answer is *yes*, but with a caveat: it may take awhile. I have been keeping a list of requested subjects over the years, and it's quite lengthy. What are the most requested subjects?

- 1) Should an elder confide in his wife about assembly matters?
- 2) What about the role of women in the church?
- 3) How can elders lead wisely on the subject of music in the church?
...just to name three (in that order).

ESN does not take official positions on such matters, and has no desire to interfere in the workings of assemblies; which is elders' work. We're a resource for (hopefully) helpful ideas, and Biblical or logical things to consider when working through tough issues.

But further, it's not just a matter of "pick one off the list." It takes time, sometimes years, for the Lord to give the needed wisdom, guidance, liberty to address some subjects. Come to think of it, that's a serious prayer request! 

Biblical Foundations

Confirming and Equipping *by Jack Spender*

If you are serious about making disciples for the Lord, these two words, can mean the difference between a healthy local church, and a stagnant one. Various renderings can be found in Bible translations, but let's look beyond shades of meanings to the big picture.

New Testament Usage

The Greek word for "confirm" or "strengthen," is "sterizo" which means to provide a solid foundation, and the strength to stand on it. It's the only summary word used in Acts to describe Paul's work with young believers on all three missionary journeys (see Acts 14:22, 15:41, 18:23).

The other word, "equip," has the idea of providing or sharpening tools or skills: see Eph. 4:12 ("perfecting," KJV; "equipping," NKJV) and II Tim. 3:17 ("thoroughly furnished," KJV; "thoroughly equipped," NKJV).

What's interesting is that the first word "confirm" or "strengthen" is used in Acts of new believers and churches; the second word "to perfect, equip, furnish" appears in books that presuppose well-grounded believers. Is there an application here for us today? I think so.

Of course the words can both refer to believers of any stage of maturity, but this does not make them synonyms. We might describe them this way: "Give them a good grounding in the faith, and prepare them for serving the Lord."

Isn't this the essence of disciple-making?

Progress in Maturity Through Strengthening

In working with young believers and new churches, one soon discovers that the perspective they gain in the world does not change over night. The world has a common saying today: "It's all about me," and this mindset can be very evident in "spiritual nurseries."

Often-heard statements like "I'm looking for a church that meets my needs," or "I don't like your slow music," or "No one has invited me home yet," give evidence.

Now we must not ignore such comments, because many times there is an element of truth in them. But the point is it will take some growing time for young believers and churches to focus on how other people are doing, instead of "what meets my needs." Many are woefully backward in this even after years.

Note how Paul worked. His main effort in the early days was to ground young believers and churches in basic truths of the faith. A study of the Acts passages mentioned above, as well as I Thessalonians, will illustrate this principle.

I love how in Acts 14:22, 23, with the workers preparing to travel on, and a thousand "crucial" bits of truth that might have been recorded, the Spirit of God preserves but three: "Go on in the faith," "You're going to have trouble," and "You need good leadership." Weighty matters for sure, and crucial to a good spiritual grounding. And, we may observe, excellent milk for babes. One wonders what things Christian workers today would emphasize in a similar situation.

Practical Application

Speaking of Speakers: God's Provision to the Assembly! *by Ed Anthony*

Perhaps you have had the experience of overhearing a phone call. You can only hear one end of the conversation. The individual at your end says "Hello, cousin John." You haven't heard from cousin John in quite a while so you immediately begin to process the reason for the call and what might be happening. The difficulty is that you can only hear someone responding at your end so you must try to understand the call by hearing only one side of the conversation.

This is the sense we sometimes get as we read what Paul, and the others that ministered, spoke to the churches through the letters of the New Testament. It was obvious that they went from place to place to minister. How or why did it happen or certain churches were involved? Did someone tell Paul where to go? Did certain churches request his help? Did he have a certain circuit he preached on each year? No doubt, we could list a dozen other possibilities. Yet, the question still holds true for churches at the other end of the line today. How or why do the Lord's servants, often called teachers or speakers, connect with a particular assembly? What is their purpose? Are they needed today? These are important questions that we hope to explore and answer in this article.

Prologue

Perhaps it would be best to first note that the environment for the teachers in the early church still exists today. First, there are local gatherings of believers throughout the world that own the Lord Jesus Christ as Head. Second, spiritual gifts are no less essential today in the building up of the body. It is important to note the gifts of evangelism, teaching, pastoring, etc. are given with a view to the work of the ministry. That is, to prepare the saints to further the ministry (Eph. 4:11-12).

Third, the assemblies of God's people need guidance. The saints are at all different stages of their spiritual journey and there are many different needs. Look at the Corinthians. Were there not many different needs evident? No doubt they had elders, and all the saints had gifts, yet it is evident they needed help (1

Cor. 7:1). Saints in the assembly should all be interested in evangelism and be willing to share the hope that is within them, yet a visit from a gifted evangelist to help the assembly may well be worth pursuing. We might summarize then that there are still gatherings, gift, and need for guidance.

Purpose

Assemblies should have a purpose in inviting a gifted individual to come and minister (see example of Peter and Cornelius, Acts 10:29). For a small work it may be that certain gifts are limited and thus there is a need for help. But clearly Paul went where he could be of help (Rom 1:10-11). As we have noted in our introduction we do not have all the details, but Paul wanted to be used to help

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and guide the saints in an assembly in such a way that when he left there would be a difference and they would be better prepared to minister themselves (Eph. 4:11-12). It is sad to see many assemblies just filling calendar dates without much thought as to what the purpose is or what the saints really need. How are we building them up so they can minister?

It is important for elders to think carefully about the food that will be given to the flock during the year. Are there areas of weakness or need? Are there portions of Scripture that the saints have little understanding about? This is not to preclude a brother being invited for a time to speak as the Lord leads, but

some guidance from the elders could be helpful.

Recently, an assembly asked me to speak for a weekend of meetings as the Lord led. They did mention that an area of focus for them was "prayer." This was quite helpful to know and I ministered on a short series from Hebrews and the importance of truly drawing nigh to God.

Sometimes good practices taken to an extreme can have an unintended adverse effect to the assembly. One area that many assemblies saw lacking a number of years ago was consecutive teaching from God's Word. Assemblies took this to heart and many today still make an effort to have consecutive teaching on a book or topic.

Unfortunately, some are doing only consecutive teaching based on various course materials or study guides as a means of filling calendar dates. I have had it happen where an assembly will contact me the week before and say, by the way, we would like you to speak on "this passage." Such things seem to indicate a lack of understanding of the importance of the preparation of the food that is to be given to the saints. God, of course, will use his Word despite man's failings but it seems that assemblies and itinerant teachers need to focus more on what and how we are ministering to the saints and less on filling a calendar because the practice has been to have one speaker each week (or teachers to be teaching somewhere every week).

Assemblies and itinerant servants need to take a renewed look at the purpose of the ministry and why God has given it.

Provision for the Assembly

We have looked at the fact that God still uses gifted itinerant servants and that there is a purpose in using them to minister to the assembly. We have also noted that assembly practices, though well-meaning can hinder the use of such servants of the Lord.

So how does God provide servants? What should assemblies be doing in using such servants? To answer this question, we must understand how God prepares both the assembly, and the servant. No

(Continued on page 3)

Confirming and Equipping (continued from page 1)

More than once, I have seen a group of young believers that hardly know “their right hand from their left hand” spiritually, trying to follow the intricacies of studies in the tabernacle! Precious truth to be sure, but one needs a powerful spiritual “blender” to turn meat into milk.

A Growing Interest in Others Through Equipping

Sooner or later—and thank the Lord, for some it comes more quickly—the truth is grasped that one way to honor the first commandment (“Love the Lord thy God”) is to obey the second (“thy neighbor as thyself”).

There are many opportunities for this, both in the believer and in the church. It begins with an understanding that the first fruits belong to the Lord. Is there time alone with the Lord each morning? In stewardship, is giving to the Lord “first fruits,” or is it coming out of whatever remains at day’s end?

Life has its cares and the Lord Jesus warned about this (Luke 8:14). Whenever I have preached on the book of Haggai, I have noted a revealing look on some faces that seemed to say “I hope those people who were spending all their time on building their own homes while the Lord’s house lay in shambles...I hope they were listening to brother Haggai!”

What Can Elders Do?

This can be a difficult question. Elders are not detectives, following people around and watching their private lives. But spiritual equipping cannot be left to chance. The assembly is God’s appointed

place for teaching and training! Remembering the following two points will pay big dividends.

First, don’t think of complex things, like learning a new language. Begin with simple things that help believers take small growth steps.

Second, as you identify areas where you’d like to see spiritual growth, make sure you provide a balance of both positive and negative input. (It’s the familiar “nurture and admonition” used in child rearing; Eph. 6:4. All praise spoils the child; all criticism makes a sour environment and discourages him.) We have space for only a couple of examples.

Concerned about people coming to the meetings late? Positive: make sure those who lead (ideally the whole family) come on time or early. Give occasional teaching on good stewardship, including time. Commend those who evidence growth. Negative: After sufficient positive input, don’t be afraid of “the sharp rebuke” (Titus 1:13). Visit perpetual late comers in their homes, and ask them to shed some light on their situation. Try to enlist their help in correcting a problem. Do not award leadership positions to those who set a poor example.

Want to see growth in understanding of worship? Positive: in addition to Christ exalting ministry, explain the nature of true worship. Encourage older believers to set a good example, especially by refraining from teaching. After something is shared from the Word, the men can ask if the saints had opportunity to respond to what they hear by a hymn or

in prayer. Negative: Some elders lament that men are giving out “favorite songs” i.e., hymns that make them feel good; rather than Christ-centered hymns; yet the people dutifully carry the “Service Hymnal” to the Lord’s table, along with the worship and remembrance hymnal.

Want to see the “Bible hour” strong on equipping. Positive: present a clear understanding of the mission of the church to equip the saints (Eph. 4:12). Invite speakers that share your goals to feed the sheep, and send equipped servants out to reach the lost. Negative: Be sure the opening exercises in the Bible hour are really preparing the people for the “main event,” to hear God speak. Curtail the clutter of lengthy announcements, special presentations etc. Work with any who have private views on their “supporting ministry” saying “Our ‘performance’ is just as important as the Bible lesson.”

Longing to see God work in personal relationships? Positive: provide teaching on the Biblical word “fellowship,” as both “being” and “doing.” Consider some small groups meeting in homes for relationship building. Negative: work at not using the word “fellowship” as a synonym for snacks or social fun times.

Elders can take heart that much of “equipping” does not lie in deep doctrines or in restructuring the assembly, but simply identifying areas for growth, and then providing both positive and corrective steps through good leadership.



Speaking of Speakers (continued from page 2)

doubt prayer plays a key role (Acts 13:2). How much time do the elders spend in prayer as they consider the food to be given to the saints, or those who should be ministering that food? Unfortunately, this seems to be an area of lack. When is the last time the elders spent an hour in prayer together concerning what the flock is to be fed? Oh, how important the work of tending the flock!

In addition to prayer, the elders must plan. It is the elders who shepherd the local assembly and have a responsibility to seek God’s help in planning (Acts

13:3; 20:28). We should keep in mind that a man plans but God directs his steps (Prov. 16:9). Paul no doubt had planned where he might go but was open to God changing the plans (Acts. 16:7). The Spirit plays a key role (Acts 13:2)

Elders should be aware of God’s servants and their availability so that they might be used effectively to meet the needs of the local assembly. Paul and others would visit assemblies that were near one another or a home that had a need (Acts 9:37-41). It was an efficient use of time and resources. Notice how many

would help Paul on to his next destination on the journey. An assembly should share when a gifted brother will be in an area with other local assemblies. Perhaps the other gatherings could use help while the brother is there. Perhaps several local assemblies could come together for a similar area of help from a gifted brother.

These are areas in which the assembly must take responsibility. In a future article, we’ll think about God’s work to prepare useful servants for this work. 

Wives' Corner

Let Past Mistakes Empower; Don't Cower *by Maria Forcucci*

Can I tell you how great our God is; how in the past few years I have seen Him work in people that I love? I just had a conversation with a sister the other day. Her story inspired me to do this article. I am ashamed to confess that I had many doubts about whether she and I would ever be able to have an honest relationship, but today I can say, AMEN to our renewed friendship and faith in each other. That is only possible because we share faith in the same great God.

You see, Lisa is an alcoholic. I, like a good Pharisee tried seeing her through some of her many struggles, of course reminding her along the way how she needed to pull herself together. She did try. Over and over again. Rehab after rehab, and even a short prison stay for a motor vehicle DUI. To use her words, "Maria, I got down into the cellar many times, but when I thought I was at my lowest point, there was a trap door dropping me down further."

What's a Christian friend to do? So, as I have conveyed to her, I handed her over to God. She has since commented that it is exactly what filled her need. The Lord is better able to deal with things we mere humans have trouble understanding. You see, Lisa didn't need my "friendship" or my feeble attempts to walk her

through court dates and drunken stupors. Most of all, she didn't need my judgment to plunge her deeper into guilt and shame. She needed God. She needed the Holy Spirit to do a work in her heart that all my good intentions fell terribly short of.

So, unlike the Pharisee, I (and many others) went into our prayer closets where none of our "good works" could be seen. Wow. It is so much more effective to lay someone at the Lord's feet. To become a silent, invisible advocate. You know what? That kind of praying probably changed me as much as it changed her. Only in my prayer closet could I view "those kind of people" in their need and not just "in their sin."

So now, Lisa is a spokesperson for Alcoholics Anonymous. She often shares things that you and I might be embarrassed about. But she will tell you, it is in sharing those deep, dark moments that she meets the Savior all over again. Her past downfalls have now become a source of power

because she can also share how the Lord helped her regain sobriety and a new lease on life. Like the apostle Paul states in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, "This is a trustworthy saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. Yet for this reason I obtained mercy...that Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example of those who would believe in Him for eternal life" (NASB).

Oh, sisters, if we could learn not to allow our mistakes, sins, shortcomings, past and present, to keep us paralyzed, but to let the Lord use them to help others! "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). My respect for Lisa has

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multiplied because through the things I wanted to judge her for, she has taught me more about the grace and power of God. So, be empowered by the Holy Spirit, don't cower with past mistakes! Your story can help others' faith!



THE SMALL PRINT

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Contact Info. Elders' ShopNotes, c/o 112 Doolittle Dr. Bethany, CT 06524, USA
E-mail: alan7s@yahoo.com
Phone: 203-393-0078.

Publisher/Editor: Jack Spender
Editorial assistance: Ruth Rodger
Layout: Ryan Farrington

Specific Bible versions used are indicated at the first quotation in each article.

Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.