

Five Key Pieces to the Puzzle of Church Administration by Derrick M. Hammond

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Over time, the concept of church administration has evolved greatly. Biblically, church administration begins with concepts depicted in passages such as Exodus 18 (Moses and Jethro) and Acts 6 (Apostles and Deacons), where church leaders chose godly believers who were able to give their attention to other responsibilities that distracted the leader from his or her primary calling.

While this basic idea has remained, the evolving nature of the “other responsibilities” in churches has caused much confusion about what church administration is or ought to be; particularly since contemporary church operations lingo has adopted terms such as “ministerial tax treatment” and “regulatory compliance.”

Response to the more recent “other responsibilities” of ministry has ranged from adopting corporate models entirely for use in the Church, which fails to comprehend the fundamental nature of Church administration, to fully rejecting any model that even remotely resembles a corporate model, which deprives modern church administration of its potential value.

The former response results in a stifled expression of the Holy Spirit, while the latter response results in woeful levels of operational inefficiency and or ignorance of the law. Biblically, the concept of administration primarily involves legal and political matters, but the broad range of “other responsibilities” is captured in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament, the actual term administration is not present, but its idea is closely related to the Hebrew word *shaphat*, which means, “to judge” (Exodus 18:13). It is well established, however, that “several passages reflect the close correlation between *shaphat* and the establishment and maintenance of justice in a context that is broader than that of the court.”¹ (Vol. 4, pg 214).

In the New Testament (NIV version), the term administration is found in three places (1Cor 12:28, Eph 3:2, and Eph 3:9). The Greek word *oikonomia*, which is used in Eph. 3:2 and 9, is closest to modern use of the term church administration and means, “management, oversight, administration, of others’ property; stewardship” (c.f. Luke 16:2-4).² The Greek word *diakonia*, which is often translated administrations by the KJV (e.g. 1 Cor. 12: 5), however, is also translated ministration, ministry, serving, relief and office in other places.

For many years, the church has focused, almost solely in some cases, on the ministerial aspects of church administration, like administering supplies to the community, aid to the sick and shut in, and mission trips around the world. Moreover, books like *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren further challenge churches to ask questions like: “What’s our business?” and “How’s business?”³ with little or no attention given to the legal and fiscal aspects of church operations, like keeping adequate financial records or governing in accordance with Employment, Tax, OSHA, HIPPA, ADA and other laws.

As churches seek to recapture the legal and political aspects of church administration, following these five principles will ensure the key pieces of the church administration puzzle are in place to maintain a healthy balance between the legal/political aspects of administration and the “other responsibilities” that set the church apart as the body of Christ.

Principle #1: The primary *role* of church administration is to assist the Pastor.

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” – Acts 20:28

Biblically, the two primary roles of a pastor are shepherd and overseer. As shepherd, the pastor is responsible for leading and feeding the congregation. As overseer, he or she is responsible for directing and discipline. In both the Old and New Testaments, the primary role of administrators in the Church is to assist God’s appointed leader.

The challenge comes when either the pastor or church leaders develop a skewed understanding of the relationship that should exist between Pastor and the administrative processes designed to support him or her. Many pastors view church administration as worldly dealings, while church leaders often view administration as a welcomed light of truth on the pastor’s dark administrative methods. The former perspective results in a Pastor who becomes frustrated with “the necessary evil of administration in an otherwise spiritual ministry”⁴, while the latter perspective results in church leaders who are overwhelmed by the folly of wisdom in a sea of blissful ignorance.

In the end, Pastors must understand that administrative processes are there to assist them. Church leaders, on the other hand, must understand that there will be times when the Pastor does not fully understand the administrative dynamics of a decision, but he or she is still the authority and should be respected. There are countless stories of Church Administrators who respected a pastoral decision that they believed was wrong but, in the spirit of submission, followed and were blessed. Ultimately, it is the Lord’s church and He blesses those who bless the man or woman of God (1 Peter 5:6).

Principle #2: The primary *expression* of church administration is love.

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.” - 1 Cor. 8:1-3

It has been said that “knowledge is power” and “power corrupts.” It goes without saying then, that knowledge has the power to corrupt. The bible echoes this thought and often reminds us of the human tendency, which is naturally in enmity with God, to be puffed up when we gain knowledge. The danger of corruption is particularly high for those responsible for the church’s administrative processes because they are exposed to knowledge that the general congregation, church leaders, or even pastor may not have. The corruption of knowledge in church administration usually manifests itself in one of two ways.

First, there is the danger of information *misuse*, also known as breach of fiduciary duty, conflict of interest, and fraud. According to one firm, over ninety percent of the major church fraud cases they chronicled in 2010 involved an alleged perpetrator who held a fiduciary position that exposed them to exclusive operational knowledge⁵. This exposure, combined with an atmosphere of trust and general lack of fiscal controls, produces a potent formula of temptation and opportunity. Love, expressed in ways that

mirror its expression in the Bible, ensures the existence of the operational structure necessary to maintain accountability.

Second, there is the danger of information *abuse*. Information is abused when it is intentionally or unintentionally used to form a judgmental attitude or stumbling block in the church. Paul speaks of information abuse when he says, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak,” noting that weak individuals can be “destroyed by your knowledge” (I Cor. 8:10-12). Love, expressed in ways that mirror the grace of the New Testament, ensures that information is consistently presented in a way that lifts and edifies the body of Christ.

Principle #3: The primary *basis* of church administration is wisdom.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” - Col. 4:5-6

Those responsible for church administration are constantly called upon to make “secular” decisions that are critical to the life of the church. Decisions related to employment relations, finance, contract procurement, assets, risk management, insurance, safety, security, property management, and servant mobilization abound in even the smallest churches. Regardless of the nature of a church administrative decision, it must always be rooted in wisdom.

Wisdom is described by many as a set of “recurring and common elements” or “generally recognizable traits.” According to Proverbs, a few characteristics of the wise include diligence (12:24), receptivity to instruction (9:9), humility (11:2), patience (19:11), careful use of words and speech (15:2), discipline (14:16) and generosity (22:9). Unfortunately, those responsible for church administration can get so caught up in doing their job, that they fail to do their job wisely.

The wisdom associated with church administration must constantly balance knowledge with an uncertainty that fosters dependence on God; action with an inaction that exhibits waiting on God; and emotion with an emotional detachment that exudes serpent-like character. Ultimately, this wisdom reflects knowing “the appropriate human response to each life moment”⁶ and since a wise act in one context may be sheer folly in another⁷, it requires total dependence on God (Prov. 3:5-6).

Principle #4: The primary *agent* of church administration is the Holy Spirit.

“the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit [of all] ... one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills...And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues...” I Cor. 12:28

The secular nature of church administrative processes often results in the misconceived idea that a person is the primary agent of administration. Grace Community International (GCI), however, has set forth a marvelous understanding of how both the people and the processes of church administration operate in light of the Holy Spirit’s work in the church.

Of the people, GCI notes:

Church administration is to involve Spirit-led, diligent leaders who support and oversee the use of interdependent spiritual gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit to the church (1 Peter 4:10-11; Romans 12:6-8). As with all the gifts of the Spirit, leadership and administration are to be used in clear-minded, love-filled and self-controlled ways (1 Peter 4:7-8), “so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (4:11) as the church “builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).⁸

Of the processes, GCI notes:

As [the church’s] understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit’s gifts have changed, its understanding of church administration has changed as well. If the reformation and renewal that the Holy Spirit has granted [the church] may be understood as “new wine,” then the church’s new administrative structures and policies are new “wine skins” designed to give appropriate form and focus to the Spirit’s gracious gifts (Luke 5:33-39).⁹

Principle #5: The primary *measure* of church administration is effectiveness.

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. – Romans 15:14

Church administration is not “oiling ecclesiastical machinery or the spinning wheels of organization, but it is the body of Christ equipping itself for mission.”¹⁰ As such, the ultimate measure of effective church administration is not the efficiency of paperwork but the effectiveness of people at work.

Greg Hawkins, executive pastor at Willow Creek Church, notes:

Measuring ministry effectiveness in the church, however, is challenging and complex because, quite frankly, transformed individuals and communities defy incremental notches. In the marketplace, money is an input and money, also, is an output. In ministry, money and other resources are the inputs and the output is ... changed lives. The real question is, ‘Are we making—is God making—a dent in people’s lives?’¹¹

Changed lives are the primary measure of effective church administration, but certainly not the only measure. Other key measures include document retention efficiency (Are you keeping the right documents?), internal controls structure (Are you minimizing the possibility of theft?) and regulatory compliance (How would you do if audited or inspected?). The ultimate measure, however, is whether the pastor, church leaders, members, and administrators are in a position to hear the Master say, “well done my good and faithful servant” on that Great Day.

Notes

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3. Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995. p. 93.
4. Edwards, D. Rex. (1975) "The Pastor as Church Administrator." *Ministry International Journal for Pastors*. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2011. Online location: <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1975/November/the-pastor-as-church-administrator>. (accessed 1 August, 2012)
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9. Ibid.
10. Edwards, Ibid.
11. Hawkins, Greg. "Measuring Ministry Effectiveness." Online location: <http://www.christianleadershipalliance.org/?measuringeffective>. (accessed 1 August, 2012)