MERIDIAN CHURCH

On Comparing Apples and Clementines

by Josh King

Some of you have no doubt noticed an incongruity between the recent request for deacon nominations and the more recent recommendations for elder apprentices. Good catch. We took a year asking for your nominations yet only give two weeks for our recommendations. What gives? We understand the confusion, it has been a spell since we had an apprentice, but we believe any bewilderment is largely due to mixing up the fruits in the basket. We're not comparing apples to apples. We're not even comparing apples to oranges. We're comparing apples to clementines.

Before we get to the clementines, lets start with the oranges. Deacons are deacons and elders are elders. Apples and oranges respectively. When looking to install deacons, we take our cue from Acts 6. When the early church saw a need, the apostles asked the church to nominate seven men. Those seven were then set before the apostles who prayed over them and laid their hands on them. Church then apostles for deacons. There is much wisdom in asking the body to nominate deacons, because, more often than not, they're going to know who is *already* acting as a deacon. There is also wisdom in setting these nominations before the elders to further test them according to qualifications laid out in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. We took things real slow to give you time to pray about your nominations and to give us time to test and pray over them. But this is all apples. What about the oranges?

With elders, we take our cue from 1 Timothy 3:1, "If anyone *aspires* to the office of overseer, he *desires* a noble task." With deacons, the *outer* call of the church takes prominence. With elders the *inner* call of the Spirit takes prominence. Deacons begin with the church saying, "*We* want you to serve." Elders begin with the man saying, "*I* want to serve." There are exceptions. Some men are encouraged by the church to pursue eldership. Some men aspire to be deacons before they are called by the church. But *formally*, the distinction holds true. Until a man is called by the church, he cannot be a deacon. Until a man desires the office of an elder, he cannot pursue it. Them's the oranges.

Now lets compare them. If elders are the higher office, shouldn't we take more time with them than we do with deacons. I want to argue that's exactly what we're trying to do. Hence the clementines. We're not asking you to eat an orange quickly. Just a clementine. An elder apprentice is not an elder just as a clementine is not an orange. Similar tastes, but different fruits. So let's consider what a clementine *is*.

What is an an elder apprentice? It starts with someone who says they *aspire* to office of an elder. What should follow? Testing and training. Who should do this testing

and training? The qualifications for an elder are laid out in the pastoral epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus. Paul tells Titus, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and *appoint elders* in every town as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul tells Timothy, "what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." Two caveats must be made in applying these verses to the church today. First, Timothy and Titus are best understood as having the unique authority of *apostolic delegates*. They are not simply pastors, they are Paul's representatives. Still, there is a parallel between them and the shepherds of a local flock. Teachers should teach teachers to teach. Second, these letters to Timothy and Titus are also given to Christ's Church. You can see this in that Paul's closing benediction in 1 Timothy is plural, best translated into *our* vernacular as "God be with *y'all*." All said, we believe the most Biblical and therefore the most prudent practice is for eldership to start with the elders an end with the church. Elders then church for more elders. The elders train and test. Once tested, they should ask the church to affirm.

Say a young man comes to the elders and says, "I want to be an elder. What should I do?" "Go to seminary," is the typical answer, but we believe it is not the best one. Seminaries can be a good help, but they are not ultimate. The great commission to make disciples was given to the church, and raising up elders is a special kind of discipleship. The church is the only authorized nursery for raising up elders. Seminaries can help, they can be a great help, but they are neither decisive nor necessary. So think of the elder apprenticeship as a kind of seminary—the kind of seminary that *must* be. I think this helps greatly in understanding how the elder apprenticeship works.

Midwestern is good seminary. They require of their applicants a letter of recommendation from their local church. Churches should take such recommendations seriously. Too many men come into seminary with a letter that shouldn't have been written. Even so, a man aspiring to the office of elder, rightfully seeking a seminary education under the oversight of the church, need not be perfectly qualified as an elder. Likewise, a recommendation of an elder apprentice does not mean we *are* recommending an *elder* to the body. It does not even mean we *will* make a recommendation in the future. There are a number of reasons why an elder apprentice may never come before the body to be affirmed as an elder.

- The apprentice who aspires to the *office* of an elder may find out what the *task* of an overseer involves and no longer desire the work.
- The elders may say "no" in a few ways:
  - They may tell a man that he doesn't have the right tools. He isn't able to teach. This "no" is likely a "never."
  - They may say that a man doesn't yet have the right character. This "no" is a "not now, maybe later."
  - They may say that a man isn't the right fit right now. Just because a man may have been a good elder over there, back then, doesn't necessarily mean he'd be a good elder over here, right now. This "no" is a "not here, at least, not now."

Also, it's good to remember that while there is a plan for an apprenticeship to be completed within a year, this only works for an apprentice-intern who can devote the majority of their time to the apprenticeship. For lay apprentices with a full-time job and a family, two years is a *fast* pace to make it all the way though. The apprenticeship then is an advance warning that a man *might*, in the distant future, be brought before the body as an elder candidate. This gives the elders much more time to train and test an elder than we would a deacon, and it gives you more time to pray and test them before you ultimately affirm them.

Our constitution requires a two week notice prior to calling an *elder*. This is a *minimal* safeguard and it is our ambition to always provide much more than this, giving ample time for prayer and conversation. Our constitution gives no parameters for elder apprentices. The apprenticeship is simply a formal disciple-making ministry of the elders. Still, because they will be privy to elders meetings, we always follow these parameters before initiating an apprenticeship. This also is why we have them fill out an apprentice questionnaire.

Now, I want to speak about the two clementines in hand, meaning, I want to apply these things to our specific situation. It has been our desire to constantly be training, testing, and affirming. We always want to have an elder apprentice. We're not eager to take on two. We'd prefer one. Frank spoke with us late last year, humbly communicating that if ever we saw fit, he desired to go through the apprenticeship. At that time Emake had not yet let us know of his desire to serve as our shepherd in song. Not knowing *when* we might have a shepherd in song or *who* might come to us (remember, one does not need to go through the apprenticeship to be presented as an elder), we told Frank to begin working on the questionnaire. So though he was presented to you later, we were speaking with him first.

We also believe we have seen God's providence in all of this. Knowing Bob's time as an elder is coming to a close, we would like to see another elder raised up while he is still serving. Anticipating Emake being added as an elder, this would mean that we would have two compensated elders. It is an unwritten rule among the elders to always have more lay elders than paid elders. We don't want to cripple the constitution with this rule, but we are zealous to maintain a majority lay eldership. Again, this is not to say we will certainly recommend all of our current apprentices in the future, but is in the pursuit of maintaining a healthy and balanced eldership that we are moving forward with both apprentice recommendations at this time.

In closing I'd like to take this opportunity to clarify another situation that could easily occur in the future. Sometimes life just hands you an orange. Lets say, God forbid, that Christ's Fellowship had to close their doors. George Mayes soon moves his membership to Meridian. He's been a faithful member for a few months and lets the elders know he'd love to serve our body. We wouldn't ask George to go through our apprenticeship. We'd probably ask him to oversee it. We'd still do the Q&A thing and give the body ample time to pray over the matter, but we wouldn't draw things out unnecessarily.

Or perhaps I suddenly die, or as I hope we'd all prefer, we're just looking to add another elder who will serve alongside me for a number of years before becoming the primary teaching elder. We find a candidate who has faithfully served in a sister church. We'd send out the questionnaire and pass his answers on to you. We'd then ask him to come preach, answer questions in person, and spend some time with the elders. We'd all pray. Then, sooner rather than later, we'd recommend him to the body. This would happen quicker than how we have proceeded with deacons this past year. It would be much quicker than seeing an elder apprentice trained, tested, and affirmed. But part of the testing would involve evaluating his years of faithful service in God's Church.

Still, it's our prayer that this would be a unique situation. Our hope and supplication is that God would raise up a young man within our body who would come to serve as the next primary teaching elder. After he's gone through the apprenticeship and we have helped him pursue the best theological education possible, I'd love to see us serve alongside each other for at least a decade as he fades in and I fade out. It's this desire, and the desire to plant churches and send missionaries, that led us to begin the elder apprenticeship. Let us pray that God will give us both more apples and more oranges.

> "*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen*" (Ephesians 3:20–21).