



Course Name: Shepherds/Elders (Decision Making)

By Tommy South

Course description:

The process of making decisions creates stress and anxiety for any leader, certainly the pressure exists for elders/shepherds also. While making decisions is not the primary task for an elder/shepherd, decisions must be made. In this lesson, you will look at the impact of making decisions, a biblical approach for making decisions, and how to avoid the challenges of indecision.

Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have...

- A. Discussed the impact of decisions and when decisions should be delegated.
- B. Developed a biblical approach to making decisions for the congregation.
- C. Considered the consequences of indecision and how to avoid it.

Outline of the class:

- A. During the first few minutes of the class divide the class into groups of three or four. Then ask each table to take 15-20 minutes to discuss the following.
 1. How are decisions currently made? (Describe the process used in leadership)
 2. List out the pros and cons to the current approach to decision-making.
- B. The primary task of elders/shepherds is looking after people (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2). While making decisions is not the *primary* work of shepherds, it is obvious that there are some decisions they must make. Their responsibility of “overseeing” or “managing” the church (Titus 1:7) naturally requires this. Also, various requests will be brought to them, and they must either make a decision about them, or delegate that decision to someone else. (Note: Since the Bible does not speak specifically regarding the process of decision-making by elders, much of what follows is opinions, based on biblical principles and experience.)
 1. Whenever possible, decisions that are not directly related to *shepherding people* should be delegated to others. (See the lesson on “Delegating Responsibility.”)
 - a. Deacons and other ministry leaders should make all decisions regarding their specific ministries. It is fine for them to seek the guidance of elders regarding decisions they need to make, but they should be sure not to burden them with questions they can resolve themselves.

- b. When questions are brought to the elders for decisions that others should make, shepherds should be clear that this request is being passed on to others for a decision. Just because someone asks the elders for a decision does not mean they should make it.
 - c. If a question/problem is delegated to someone else, shepherds should stand behind that person and their decision, not second-guess or take back the role of making the decision. This will help others develop confidence in handling responsibilities vital to the work of the church and encourage them to grow in their own leadership abilities.
 - d. Shepherds will always need to remind one another that some decisions are not for them to make but need to be passed on to others.
2. Major decisions made by shepherds which affect the whole congregation should always be communicated clearly.
- a. EX: Beginning a new ministry or terminating an existing one.
 - b. Whenever possible, give reasons for major decisions (Confidentiality may preclude this in some cases).
 - c. If a decision is announced but later needs to be reversed, the change of plans needs to be communicated also, along with an explanation for the decision. It is not acceptable to reverse course without explanation, as this will erode confidence in the shepherds.
3. Shepherds must make the decisions they believe are (1) in keeping with biblical teaching, and (2) in the best interests of the church. These should be their *only* compelling interests.
- a. It will never be possible to please everyone, so this should not be a goal. Simply because someone disagrees with or criticizes a decision does not mean it should be changed.
 - b. At times, shepherds will simply need to take the heat for the decisions they make, as long as they are convinced the decisions meet the two criteria of being biblical and in the best interests of the church as a whole.
 - c. Shepherds should always be open to meeting with those who question a decision and attempt to answer their concerns and questions as clearly and openly as possible.
 - d. There will be times when it will be best to ask the entire congregation to participate in a decision, especially when the decision affects everyone and involves a major change. Elders must remember that they are not to be “domineering over those in your charge,” but to lead by example (1 Peter 5:3).
4. Shepherds must be prepared for disagreements among themselves and know how to resolve these quickly.
- a. A unanimous decision, while always *desirable*, will not always be *possible*.

- b. Shepherds should NEVER require unanimity for the decision. Doing so gives one person the opportunity to control *all* decisions that are made and will prove to be fatal to the effectiveness of leadership.
 - c. As seen in the discussion of Acts 15 (below), open discussion about disagreements is a healthy thing. Everyone should feel free to express his views on an impending decision. It is not “divisive” to disagree.
 - d. Shepherds who are outvoted on a decision should be willing to accept the decision of the majority, and to stand with them if the decision is questioned.
 - e. If a shepherd is unable to attend a meeting where a decision is made by the rest, the absent shepherd should not engage in second-guessing that decision.
5. Acts 15 and the process of decision-making.
- a. V. 1 – The teachings of some Jewish Christians regarding what was required of Gentile converts to Christ led to the necessity of a decision.
 - b. Vv. 2 & 7 – This was framed as a “salvation issue,” so it required the attention of the church’s leaders, which at that time included the apostles and the elders of the church in Jerusalem.
 - c. Note that even though there were apostles present, the decision still required the consideration of reasons pro and con why Gentiles should/should not be required to be circumcised, and “much debate” among those present. I.e., the authority of the apostles did not supersede the need for a rational discussion of the question.
 - d. Even though there was a human process involved in making this decision, it was ultimately the decision of both those present and the Holy Spirit (v. 28). Since the Spirit indwells all believers, they were confident of His guidance.
 - e. We are not told the mechanics of how the decision was reached, but James (the Lord’s brother) was spokesman for the group and expressed his opinion, which was adopted by the entire group: the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised, but should, out of consideration for their Jewish brothers, abstain from certain practices that Jews found offensive (vv. 19-21).
 - f. The decision was communicated to the church in Antioch, where the problem had first arisen. Comparing v. 4 with v. 6, it is not clear whether there was a separate meeting that did not include the whole church or not. But v. 12 suggests that the whole church was involved in the discussion and decision, since it refers to “all the multitude” (As in the KJV; Greek, *plethos*; ESV has “all the assembly”). Notice that “the whole church” (v. 22) participated in the decision to communicate the decision in this way, likewise, suggesting that the entire church had taken part in the discussion and decision. This was not a minor issue.

- g. Based on the later letters of Paul, we should not think this decision was accepted by all. It obviously was not, since Paul had to address it in his letters to the Romans and Philippians, both of which were written several years after the “Jerusalem Conference” (Galatians is directly concerned with this problem but was likely written *before* the conference described in Acts 15). Even though the decision was not popular with everyone, the apostles and elders did not rescind it.
 - h. How does this event serve as a model for shepherds and their decisions today?
 - *It shows that resolving disputes is a responsibility elders need to accept and not one to be avoided.
 - *It shows the importance of open discussion and exchange of ideas when an important decision must be made.
 - *It demonstrates the importance of involving the whole church when the decision is one that affects everyone – and especially when it involves the resolution of a doctrinal question or dispute.
 - *It is a reminder that as a church and its leaders seek to do God’s will, His Spirit is with us for guidance and wisdom.
 - *It is a reminder that a decision does not have to be acceptable to everyone to be valid, and that valid decisions should not be rescinded simply because someone objects.
6. Avoiding indecision
- a. Shepherds must avoid the pitfall of indecision. It is sometimes easier to “kick the can down the road,” but most matters that shepherds need to deal with must be faced eventually. Try to use no more time than is absolutely necessary to deal with any question.
 - b. Failure to be decisive becomes a drain on a shepherd’s time and energy, as the same issue(s) must be discussed repeatedly, still without a decision.
 - c. Bob Turner* lists the following *four dangers of being indecisive*:
 - *It allows non-leaders to make decisions, rather than the leaders.
 - *It allows circumstances to make our decisions for us, rather than us making them.
 - *It allows dissenters to make decisions, and a small faction can end up deciding for the whole church.
 - *It promotes a lack of accomplishment, a sense of not getting anywhere.

Conclusion:

- A. While not a primary function in the role of a shepherd, making decisions is part of the task facing them. How will they make wise and informed decisions? The guidelines established in Acts 15 provide a basis to consider regarding each decision.
- B. One of the most critical concerns for every elder/shepherd is being indecisive. Leaders must take necessary steps to avoid indecision and the consequences that often result from doing so.
- C. As an eldership, you should take time to establish a process for making decisions. Additionally, remember that if the matter at hand does not directly involve *shepherding people*, then the decision should be delegated to others. We will talk more about delegation in the next lesson.

*Sunset Academy of Leadership Training, online lessons on developing leadership
(www.salt.sunset.bible)