**Series: Core Values of Agape Christian Church**

**Sermon: What to do With a Dead Horse**

One of the tribes of Native Americans from the Dakota region, I don’t remember if it was Dakota or Lakota, anyway they had a bit of wisdom that we moderns would do well to learn and follow:

*When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount and take a new horse*.

That’s not how we do things today. With tongue in cheek, and with modern business and politics in mind, someone produced this list of 15 strategies for when you’re riding a dead horse:

1. Buy a stronger whip
2. Change riders
3. Say things like, “*This is the way we’ve always done it*.”
4. Appoint a committee to study the horse.
5. Arrange a visit to other sites to see how they ride a dead horse.
6. Offer special training to improve riding ability.
7. Change the requirements so that we can declare, “*This horse is not really dead*.”
8. Hire a special contractor who can ride a dead horse.
9. Harness several dead horses together to increase productivity.
10. Declare, “*No horse is too dead to beat*.”
11. Provide additional funding to increase the horse’s performance.
12. Purchase a product to make dead horses run faster.
13. Declare that, “*The horse is better, faster, and cheaper dead*.”
14. Form a committee to find new uses for a dead horse.
15. Promote the dead horse to a supervisory position.

I hate to admit it, but that’s not just business and politics. It often describes churches. Most churches seldom change the way they do things, even if what they’re doing isn’t working. Especially small churches like to ride their dead horses until the rider dies with it.

When I first became minister of a church, this church, I quickly learned that we were riding a dead horse. I mean no disrespect about the people who were our church in those days. They were lovely Christian people who loved the Lord and were faithfully committed to Him.

The problem was how we understood what we should be doing as a church. That affected our structure and our leadership. We knew our horse was dead so we tried harder; we got new riders, declared that our horse was good enough as it was.

Here’s how our horse worked:

* We had Elders and Deacons, just like we do now.
* The Elders and Deacons met as a board once each month.
* (Interesting, because we had more Deacons than Elders, the Deacons could out vote the Elders on a decision.)
* The board was structured like our government: Elders were the Senate; Deacons were the Congress; the minister was the President.
* The board’s role was to keep the minister in line.
* The minister’s role was to do the ministry of the church.

That’s it. We didn’t see that all of us, as a church, were responsible to reach out beyond the walls of our church. That was the minister’s job. One elder even said the words one time, *That’s what we hired you for*.

When Agape Christian Church and Maple City Christian Church merged we decided we needed a new horse. Our horse was dead. No church can survive on the work of only one man. We needed a live horse, not just a clone of what we already had.

Do you remember the movie “*Multiplicity*”? Michael Keaton played a man who got too busy for his own good so he had himself cloned and divided up the work. Then one of the clones had himself cloned. Of course we know that a copy of a copy is never right so eventually he had a rather childlike and humorous clone that made a mess of everything.

We realized that even cloning our two churches into this new combined church would still be riding a dead horse. That’s when we sought Bible principles of how to be a church. We focused on leadership, establishing as one of our core values: **We will equip our leaders to serve effectively**.

What does that mean for what leadership should look like in a church? How should leadership function? What is the purpose of leadership?

We still have Elders and Deacons but with more Biblically sound roles. Let’s talk about them this morning, starting with Deacons.

1. Deacons are officers of the church. Except for the first Deacons, the Bible doesn’t tell us how they were chosen or appointed, so we’re free to establish our own way.

Deacons are not Elders in training. They’re leaders with specific responsibilities.

A Deacon may become and Elder, but not necessarily. Under the guidance of the Elders, Deacons manage certain nuts and bolts operations in the church.

The first reference to Deacons in the Bible is found in Acts 6. The young church in Jerusalem had a problem. As the church grew, we’re talking thousands of members, they took on the responsibility of providing food for widows. The non-Jewish widows felt that they were being overlooked.

They went to the Apostles who were the Elders of that first Christian church, looking for relief. The Apostles took this seriously and said, *It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.* Acts 6:2 As the Elders of the church they were responsible for teaching and spiritual care.

They told the church to choose ( – carefully select), careful select seven men to whom we’ll give this responsibility. This was the beginning of the office of Deacon in the church. The word deacon means to “serve tables”, like a waiter. It came to meam someone who ministers in some capacity.

We’re not told of any other responsibilities of these men. We’re only told that the church choose seven non-Jewish men, known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, to lead this ministry.

This is why we now choose Deacons each with a specific responsibility. We ask them to take care of certain ministries and we give them the authority to do it.

The New Testament describes qualifications for someone who would be a Deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. We expect our Deacons, whether men or women, to fit these. We ask you, before you vote to approve of someone to serve our church, consider how well the candidate demonstrates these objective standards.

We understand that nobody’s a 10 in everything, but we expect our Deacons to be aware of these criteria and maintain consistency with them.

Do you see how this is a new and living horse? Deacons have important roles. Instead of the minister being responsible for each ministry, Deacons accept certain of the responsibilities.

1. Elders are also officers of the church.

When the Apostles were alive they could appoint Elders. *Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.* Acts 14:23

Appoint is the word  which means both to appoint and to install. Eldership is a formal thing in the church because Elders have huge responsibilities.

There are three lists of qualifications for Elders, 1 Timothy 3:3-7; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3. Many of the items on these lists are the same as for Deacons. The reason there are more is because Elders have a higher profile position in the church with spiritual responsibilities.

As with Deacons, no man is a 10 in everything, but Elders must show each of these characteristics to a strong degree.

The Elders’ primary role is to be shepherds of the church. The Apostle Paul said to the Elders of the church in Ephesus,

*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

Peter, the lead Apostle wrote to all the churches,

*To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed. Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers.* 1 Peter 5:1f

The first responsibility of an Elder is to be a shepherd. The image of an Elder as a shepherd is rich with meaning. A shepherd stands long hours providing safety; he leads his charges to fresh grazing pastures; he provides clean water; he seeks lost sheep; he treats their wounds, and carries the weak.

This image reflects intimacy, tenderness, concern, skill, hard work, personal suffering, and love. That’s an Elder in the church. Trust me when I say, that describes the men who serve as Elders at ACC.

Both Paul and Peter declare that Elders are overseers. That noun is our word Bishop. It carries a certain sense of authority over those in the Elders’ care.

Paul started his charge to those Elders from Ephesus with “keep watch”, .  means to pay close attention. He said,

*I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!* Acts 20:29-31

Be on your guard is , means to be fully awake and alert to danger, like a sentry at a military fort.

Satan hates a church that is sharing the Gospel and being the hands and feet of Jesus. He’ll try to disrupt that church. The Elders are the first ones responsible to watch for and protect the church from false teaching and divisive behaviors, whether from within or from outside the body.

That’s a much different horse than what we rode before. Instead of the ministers being primarily responsible for the spiritual life of the congregation, our Elders accept that it’s their responsibility.

Have you noticed that there has been no Biblical mention of professional ministers yet? Not many churches in the New Testament era had a paid preacher. There were missionary type preachers like Paul, and there were men like Timothy and Titus who served specific churches, much like Ben and I do here.

Also, it’s obvious that some were paid positions. Paul wrote,

*The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*

*For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.* 1 Timothy 5:17

This about men who correspond to our full-time preachers and ministers today. By the way, I don’t want you to get carried away with the comparison to an ox, however I do like the “double honor” part.

It was natural that churches would evolve to have one or more men serve full-time in the leading and teaching role. The Apostle John seems to have been responsible over several congregations, but primarily Elders were responsible for preaching and teaching.

It’s not necessary that paid ministers are Elders. In many churches they are automatically considered Elders. That’s acceptable. Certainly we would want the preachers and teachers of our church to have the same qualities as Elders.

All Elders are equal in responsibility, however some will take on greater roles than others. Elders are not all created equal in giftedness, experience, dedication, Biblical knowledge, and teaching ability in the church they served.

The Romans had a law, *Primus inter peres*, or First among equals. That applies to Elders concerning function not responsibility or importance. Some Elders are naturally born leaders and find themselves being first in taking responsibility.

Do you see how this is a different horse than the one we were riding when we left the ministry of the church to the minister? Now the Elders take responsibility for the ministry. Ben and I serve under the authority and guidance of Elders. We work as a team to lead our church in God’s call.

Let me add, Ben and I are so very grateful for our supporting and encouraging Elders.

That’s the sermon for today. We’ve been preaching about the core values of Agape Christian Church. Biblical leadership is one of our core values. We value leaders who are qualified and serve as defined in the Bible. And so **we will equip our leaders to serve effectively**.

Now there’s one more issue that I almost always talk about when I talk about the Elders of the church. There is room for debate whether or not women can serve as Elder in a New Testament Christian Church.

The Bible speaks of women serving as Deacon, but there is no reference to any women serving as Elder during the time of the New Testament. Maybe that’s because no women had served in that office when the New Testament letters were written, or maybe it’s because God didn’t intend for women to be Elders.

I am ever so grateful for the wonderful women of ACC who lead in important ministries, faithfully and effectively. You teach well in both adult and children’s studies. Many of you would make excellent Elders.

I also thank you for not pressing this issue by asking to serve as Elder. If someone did, we would study the Bible for God’s will on this. Then whatever we decided would create division in our church. Because you’re willing to serve without seeking the title and office of Elder, you save us from the heartache of division. I thank you.

Finally, I want to encourage everyone to consider the leadership of ACC. Some of you have been gifted by God to serve in leadership roles in which you will lead and direct ministry. I encourage you to think about how you prepare yourself to lead.

Last week Keith and Lisa Schwingendorf arranged for me to enjoy hearing former basketball coaches Gene Keady and Bobby Knight talk about coaching and the Big 10 Conference and their 20 year rivalry.

They talked a lot about how they coached kids to be the best players they could be. One concept really stood out. They didn’t just teach the players to have a will to win. They taught them to *have the will to prepare to win*.

That’s a good philosophy for church leaders. If we’re going to be a successful church that makes disciples of Jesus who know and grow in Him, we must have *the will to prepare to be successful*.

For everything we do in our ministry, it is essential that we prepare well. When I was in college and graduate school, they drilled into my head, *If you fail to prepare you prepare to fail*. They didn’t talk about that in my Doctoral program. I guess they figured if I didn’t know that by then, I wasn’t going to learn it now.

I challenge you to have *the will to prepare to be successful* in your ministry.

What should you do if you discover you’re riding a dead horse? If you want to get somewhere, you change horses. We know we’re riding a live horse when we are doing things the way the Bible says. That’s especially in the leadership of our church.