

# THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

*G. Michael Cocoris*



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## PREFACE

Most people who attend a church have only a vague impression of how it is organized. From their experience in the church in which they grew up or where they came to Christ, they formed perceptions of biblical terms, such as bishop, elder, pastor, and deacon. Then, when they encounter one of those terms in the Bible, they automatically assume it means what they have experienced in their church.

That is what happened to me. I came to Christ in a Baptist Church. I attended a Baptist College. I was ordained in a Baptist church. When it came to the organization of a church, all I had experienced was “Pastor” and “the Deacon Board.” Since “pastor” and “deacon” are biblical terms, I assumed my church had a biblical structure. *From my experience*, I was convinced that my perception of church organization was correct.

When I was in seminary, I had an “encounter” with a fellow student who had a different concept of church polity than I did. I “withstood him to the face.” He did not budge. Provoked by our discussion, I went home, grabbed my exhaustive concordance, and looked up every reference to bishop, elder, deacon, and pastor in the Bible. I concluded that I could “prove” my position from the Bible. Granted, a few passages did not exactly fit my preconceived notions, but, at the time, I felt that I had an explanation for those “problem passages.”

Years later, as I was listening to a tape of a Bible teacher, I saw for the first time what that fellow student was trying to tell me. He was right! My preconceived ideas had blinded me. In light of what the Bible simply and clearly says, I was wrong about what I thought it taught about church government. I changed my mind on the spot.

Since then, I have looked at this subject in the Scripture repeatedly. I have also pastored two churches where I have attempted to put into practice what the Scripture teaches. As a result, I have made slight revisions in my thinking. Frankly, I still have some questions, but it seems to me that the New Testament clearly presents the basics of church organization and church government.

May the Lord give us understanding and the grace to do what He says in His Word.

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# INTRODUCTION

What does the New Testament say about the organization of the church? Throughout church history, that question has been answered a number of different ways. The issue is, “Where does authority reside?”

*Episcopalianism* The Greek word for “bishop” is “episcopal” (*episcopos*), hence, the name “Episcopalian.” After the close of the New Testament, early in church history, the idea emerged that a bishop was over a group of churches. In the Episcopal form of church government, a bishop *outside* the congregation has authority over the congregation.

This is a hierarchical system. It consists of a chain of command that extends outside and above the local congregation. Today, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, and Methodist churches have this form of church government. In the Methodist Church, it is a rather simple structure. There is only one level. A bishop selects the pastor for the church. In the Episcopal Church, it is more elaborate and in the Roman Catholic Church, it extends all the way to the Pope.

*Presbyterianism* The Greek word for “elder” is “presbyterian” (*presbuteros*), hence, the name “Presbyterian.” The Protestant Reformation ushered in Presbyterianism, where authority resides in a group of elders. Thus, in the Presbyterian form of church government, elders *outside* the congregation have authority over the congregation. This is a federal system consisting of a central authority. In a denominational structure, like the Presbyterian Church, the group of elders within the church is called the Session. The presbytery governs all the churches in an area. The group above that is the synod and at the highest level is the general assembly. The synods and the general assembly are outside the church. The decisions of each group are subject to review and revision by the next highest group. Reformed churches have a similar system.

*Congregationalism* After the Protestant Reformation, the congregational form of government arose in England. In the congregational form of church government, the congregation has authority. In this form, there is no individual or organization above the local congregation.

This is a democratic system. Actually, it is usually a *representative* democracy, especially in larger churches. Congregationalism does not necessarily mean that the congregation makes every decision. The congregation reserves the major decisions (such as calling a Pastor and buying property) for itself and elects a group from within the church (deacons or a church council), who are representatives and servants of the church. The elected group is answerable to the church, the people who chose them. Groups that practice this form of church government include the Congregationalist, the Baptist, most Lutheran groups, and independent churches.

**Summary:** The human authority for a church resides in an individual outside the church (a bishop), groups in or outside the church (elders), or the local congregation. All claim Scriptural support for their model.

The Bible speaks of bishops, elders, deacons, and the gift of pastor, as well as the “whole congregation.” According to the Bible, what do these various individuals do? What is their responsibility? What is their authority? Who has the authority to do what?



# THE PURPOSE OF A CHURCH

The most fundamental and most important issue in any group is, “What is the purpose of the organization?” Purpose is simply “the reason something exists” (the end in view). It is the broadest statement of aspiration. A clearly defined purpose is essential to an effective organization. To ask, answer, and always aim at the purpose is the first step toward realizing the very reason an organization exists.

On the other hand, to not do that is 1) to almost guarantee that an organization will never fully realize its purpose. It is hard enough to accomplish that end when everyone is moving toward it. If the purpose is not clearly defined, it will almost surely not be achieved. 2) to certainly produce confusion in the minds of many. 3) to surely allow the organization to become an end in itself.

With that in mind, “what is the purpose of the church?”

*Is it evangelism?* There are churches that say their purpose is evangelism. Granted, the church is to preach the gospel, but the church gathering is not to have an evangelistic meeting.

*Is it teaching?* There are churches that claim their purpose is to teach. I once walked into a church where I was invited to speak. There were pews with hymns books and a pulpit. Behind the pulpit, instead of a choir loft, there was a whiteboard! That is an extreme case, but there are churches that believe that the primary purpose of the church is to teach. Admittedly, the church is to teach, but the church is not a school or a classroom.

*Is it serving?* All churches serve in some fashion. This is so much a part of the church that people get the idea that the very purpose of the church is service. No doubt, the church is to serve its members and the community, but the church is not a service station.

*Is it worship?* There is no doubt that the church is to worship? Jesus said, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23-24), but obviously, the church is to do more than that. Therefore, the purpose is more than that.

Where does an organization get its purpose? The founding fathers formulate it (hopefully clearly). In the case of the church, God, the Founder of the church, determines the purpose. God has revealed His purpose for the church in His Word.

## The Purpose is to Glorify God

From a biblical perspective, the purpose of the church is to glorify God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; 3:21; Col. 1:15-18). That is the purpose of everything (1 Cor. 10:31)! The famous Westminster Confession contains that well-worn line to the effect that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

## To Glorify God is to Reveal Him

What does it mean to glorify God? In John 16:14, speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, “He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.” The Holy Spirit glorifies Christ by declaring, revealing, and showing what He is like. Thus, to glorify God means to manifest

what God is like. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so the saints are to reflect the glory of the Son.

In the Old Testament, Achan stole things from Jericho, and as a result, the whole nation was defeated at Ai. God revealed that the thief was Achan and Joshua said to him, “My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.” And Achan answered Joshua and said, “Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done” (Josh. 7:19-20). To glorify God means to manifest His attributes (Jn. 16:14). By confessing his sin, Achan would be ascribing to God the glory of His omniscience of which no secrets are hidden and His justice in punishing it. God regards the confession of truth as intimately connected with giving Him glory (2 Chron. 30:8; Lk. 23:47; Jn. 9:24). Withholding confession robs God of His right as well as incurs His displeasure.

## **To Reveal Him is to Reveal His Holiness and Love**

Perhaps, it should also be asked, “What characteristics of God are to be demonstrated?”

*God is Holy and Love* The characteristics of God can be summarized in two categories. The Old Testament says, “God is holy” (Lev. 11:44) and the New Testament says, “God is Love” (1 Jn. 4:8).

God revealed Himself to Moses, “Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation” (Ex. 34:5-7). These characteristics of God can be summarized in two categories: grace and justice

Of Jesus, it is said that He was “full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14).

God is holy, just, and truth, on the one hand, and loving, gracious, and merciful on the other. The greatest illustration of God being both just and gracious is the gospel. Paul puts it like this. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-26). All have sinned and there is a penalty, death. If God is just, He will demand that the penalty be paid. If He is loving, He will forgive. How can He do both? He paid the penalty. So He is just. Now, He is free to forgive without being unjust.

*Believers are to Reflect Righteousness and Love* We are to be like God, that is, just and merciful all at the same time. That is not only true of everything we do as individuals, it is true of what the church does as well. “Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. And these things command that they may be blameless. But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an

unbeliever. Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work. But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith. And besides, they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things, which they ought not. Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some have already turned aside after Satan. If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows" (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

The church is to show mercy to those in need, but that does not mean giving to everyone who asks. It does not mean giving to everyone who has a need in the congregation. That is not right. Mercy is balanced with truth.

**Summary:** The purpose of the church is to glorify God, to show that He is holy (righteous, just) and loving (merciful and gracious).

All believers are to demonstrate holy love (true love) in all they think, say, and do. That purpose should be kept before everyone in the church all the time so that the purpose of the church will be achieved.

How often we forget the very purpose for why we are here. Given a job at church or in life, we define ourselves in terms of that job. I am the Pastor of the church. Therefore, my job is to speak and shepherd the flock, right? Yes, I do those things, but the purpose for my being here is to glorify God in everything I say and do.

The main thing is to see to it that the main thing is the main thing.

Preaching at a large church with several people sitting on the platform, Jack Hyles assigned each person a job that firefighters have to do at the firehouse, such as polishing the fire truck, rolling up the fire hose, caring for the dog, etc. Then, he went to each person and said, "What is your job?" Each responded by repeating the job he had been given. Hyles responded, "No, no, no! You are a firefighter! Your job is to put out fires! Believers have a job in the church, but their ultimate purpose is to glorify God.



# THE OBJECTIVES OF A CHURCH

The second most important issue in an organization is its objectives. Objectives are that which must be accomplished if the purpose is to be realized. Long-range objectives are more specific aspirations than the purpose.

## The Source of the Objectives

The Bible is the source of the objectives of a church. The following is a brief explanation of three of the most pertinent passages on church objectives.

*Matthew 28:18-20* Jesus Christ gave the apostles a commission, which is called the Great Commission. Actually, He gave the commission five times (Mt. 28:16-20; Mk. 16:14-18; Lk. 24:44-49; Jn. 20:19-23; Acts 1:6-11). Matthew records, “Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Mt. 28:18-20).

Based on His claim (“therefore”) of having all authority in heaven and earth, the Lord issues a command. The only command in this passage is “to make disciples.” The Greek word rendered “disciple” means “learner.” Therefore, the Great Commission is to make learners, not learners in the sense of becoming an academic student who only learns concepts. It is learning in the sense of being obedient to commands. Therefore, perhaps “making apprentices” more accurately conveys the idea.

Clustered around that imperative are three participles: “going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” The main verb (“make disciples”) indicates *what* is to be done, and the participles (“going,” “baptizing,” “teaching”) show *how* it is to be done.

Step 1 is “going.” This participle could be translated “as you go” or “having gone.” The Lord does not amplify the “going” here, but in Mark 16:15, He adds, “Go (the same Greek word and construction as in Mt. 28:19) into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” Evidently, between the going and baptizing comes presenting the gospel and inviting people to Christ.

Step 2 is “baptizing.” When people hear the message about Jesus Christ and trust Him, they are saved (Mk. 16:16). Then, they are to be baptized. In Acts, that is always the order: hear, believe, and be baptized (for example, Acts 18:8). Peter says that baptism is a symbol (1 Pet. 3:18). Just as a wedding ring is a symbol of the union between a man and a woman, so baptism is a symbol of a believer’s union with Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3-5). Baptism also identifies a believer with a body of believers. Baptism is to be done in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Step 3 is “teaching.” After people have trusted Christ for eternal life (Jn. 3:36) and have been baptized, they are to be taught. Jesus said they are to be taught “all things that I have commanded you.” When asked, “Which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:36-39). Jesus also taught us to remember Him in the Lord’s Supper (Mt. 26:26-29), to pray (Lk. 18:1), and to give (Lk. 6:38).

*Acts 2:41-45* After the Lord ascended, the apostles, to whom the commission was given, did what the Lord told them to do. “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day, about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2:41-45).

Notice, they preached the gospel (Acts 2:14-36, 41), they baptized (Acts 2:41), and they taught (“continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” in Acts 2:42). They also fellowshiped together, broke bread (another term for the Lord’s Supper), prayed (Acts 2:42), and gave (Acts 2:45)—things the Lord taught that we should do (Jn. 15:12; Mt. 26:26-29; Lk. 18:1, 6:38). They did other things not mentioned in this passage, like singing (1 Cor. 14:26) and greeting one another with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16). Jesus taught that these too should be done (Mk. 14:26; Mt. 5:47).

In short, they started a church (Acts 2:47).

*Ephesians 4:11-16* The Apostles also wrote letters to instruct churches. In one of those letters, the Apostle Paul instructed the churches to do some things that are also objectives for all churches. “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head; Christ; from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:11-16)

God gives spiritual gifts to believers. This passage mentions four speaking gifts and says that the immediate purpose of these gifts is “for the equipping of the saints” (Eph. 4:12). Training is the idea (Lk. 6:40).

Since the gifts of apostles and prophets were foundational (Eph. 2:20) and no longer exist today, it is the responsibility of evangelists and pastor/teachers (in the Greek text “pastor” and “teacher” refers to the same person) and, perhaps, other gifted believers to equip saints by ministering the Word to them. Paul told Timothy that all Scripture was inspired and profitable to “thoroughly equip” (1 Tim. 3:16-17). Thus, gifted believers are to minister the Word (2 Tim. 4:1-2) to train others so that they can minister.

The intermediate purpose of these spiritual gifts is “for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). All believers have a gift (Eph. 4:7). They are to be equipped to use that gift to serve others in the body of Christ, so they can be built up.

The ultimate purpose of gifted believers equipping saints for their ministry is stated negatively: believers should not be immature infants who are easily swayed and deceived (Eph. 4:14). Then it is stated positively: speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (Eph. 4:15-16). In short, the ultimate aim is spiritual maturity, that is, Christ-likeness. Three times in this passage, Paul mentions love (Eph. 4:2, 15, 16). He ends with love. The ultimate in Christ-like maturity is love.

There is one more verse in this paragraph and it sounds complex and even confusing. It says, “From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying



of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). Paul is using the figure of the human body to illustrate the body in Christ. Every part of the body is connected to the head—Christ. The point is as *each part fulfills its proper function, the body grows in love.*

## The Nature of the Objectives

These passages indicate that there are five major objectives of a church.

*Relationship* The first and foremost thing anyone must do is to establish a relationship with Jesus Christ. That is what Jesus meant when He said, “Preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16:15). The gospel is the good news that Jesus died to pay for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3-4). When people trust Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 6:23), they establish a relationship with Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:3).

*Worship* The word “worship” could be used to summarize a number of things the church is told to do. The Hebrew and Greek words for worship mean things like “to bow down, to kiss (the feet or the hand), to reverence, to venerate, to serve.” The dictionary definition for the English verb “worship” is “to honor and love a deity.” Honor is the idea. Praying, singing, and observing the Lord’s Supper are ways we honor and express our love for the Lord (Acts 2:41-45; Eph. 5:19; 1 Cor. 14:26).

*Fellowship* After faith in Christ, believers are to “fellowship” (Acts 2:42). The Greek verb translated “fellowship” means “to share, to give.” The noun means “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.” In fact, in their well-respected Greek Lexicon, Arndt and Gingrich say that because the word “fellowship” means “close relationship,” it is a favorite expression for the marital relationship as the most intimate between human beings (Arndt and Gingrich, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., page 438).

The local church is a fellowship of believers. Fellowshiping with other believers in a local church includes things like baptism, which identifies a believer with the Lord and a group of believers, giving, and developing close relationships. Although the New Testament does not specifically speak about church membership, it certainly implies it. Believers were numbered (Acts 2:41; 4:4) and “added” (Acts 2:41). Close fellowship should include membership.

*Discipleship* Jesus said we were to make disciples, that is, “learners.” Jesus said to teach baptized believers “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20). He also said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (Lk. 6:40). Jesus is our teacher and when we are fully trained, we will be like Him, full of truth and grace (Jn. 1:14).

*Servantship* Finally, believers are to be equipped to minister (Eph. 4:12). Jesus said that He “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mk. 10:45). If we minister to each other as the Lord intends, we will all end up more and more like Christ. Out of servantship comes leadership.

## The Functions of a Church

To say the same thing another way, the New Testament gives a church a number of “practices,” tasks it is to perform. These include:

Proclaiming (Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:46-49; Acts 8:4)

Baptizing (Mk. 16:16; Mt. 28:19; Acts 2:41; 18:8)

Remembering (Lk. 22:19; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:23-26)  
Teaching (Mt. 28:20; Acts 2:42)  
Praying (Lk. 18:1; Acts 2:42; 12:12)  
Singing (Mt. 26:30; Mk. 14:26; 1 Cor. 14:26)  
Fellowshipping (Jn. 13:34; Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:24-25)  
Giving (Mk. 12:42-44; Lk. 6:38; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-6)  
Managing (Mt. 10:14; Acts 6:3)  
Serving (Mt. 4:10; Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45; Acts 6:2-3)  
Sending (Jn. 20:21; Acts 13:3)

**Summary:** The purpose of the church is to glorify God by establishing a relationship with Him through faith in Christ and fulfilling the functions of a church, including worshipping the Lord, fellowshipping with other believers, learning to be Christ-like, and serving.

To illustrate, the purpose of the church is to glorify God. To glorify God is to show what He is like. One of the objectives (practices) of the church is to observe the Lord's Table. Why do that? Besides the fact that the Lord commanded it (1 Cor. 11:24), it proclaims the Lord's death (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord's Supper glorifies God because it shows what He has done for us, thus, showing what He is like.

# The AUTHORITY IN the CHURCH

In order for the church to realize its purpose by accomplishing its objectives, it has to be organized and governed. Churches are governed according to their denominational tradition, which may or may not be biblical. Every church should ask, “What does the *Bible* say about the governance of the church?”

In a sense, the Bible says very little about the governance of a church. On the other hand, the New Testament does contain some commands and examples pertaining to church government. It speaks of the “whole church,” bishops, elders, deacons, etc. “Who has the authority in the church?” What authority do they have?

## The Divine Authority

For starters, all authority in heaven and on the earth is given to Jesus Christ (Mt. 28:18). He is the head of the church (Eph. 1:22). Churches are prone to forget the headship of Christ. Traditions and programs not only dethrone Him, but they also shove Him out the door, so that He is on the outside looking in (Rev. 3:20). All the members of the church need to be constantly reminded that Jesus Christ is the head of the church.

## The Final Authority

*Apostles* As God the Father sent Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ sent the Apostles (Jn. 20:21). In the New Testament, the Apostles had authority over churches (Acts 6:2; 1 Cor. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 13:2; 3 Jn. 9-10).

The problem for us is that there are no apostles today because to be an apostle, one must have seen the risen Christ (Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 9:1) and He does not appear to people today. The apostles were the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20) and the foundation has been laid. Being in the twenty-first century is like being on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor, not the foundation. So, who has the authority in the church today?

*The New Testament* Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles (and in some cases those associated with them) wrote the New Testament. It is the authoritative word for the church today. The old adage is true: “The Bible is the final authority for faith and practice.”

## The Human Authority

*The Apostles* As has been pointed out, the Apostles had authority over the churches. The Apostles acted as a group (Acts 6:1-4). So, at first, the Apostle, as a group, were the “human” authority over the churches.

*Elders* The human authority shifted from the Apostles as a group to a group from within each church called elders. There was a transition from apostle-rule to elder-rule. The Apostle Paul appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). At first, elders functioned alongside of the Apostles (Acts 15:4, 6, 22 ff.; 16:4; 21:18), but evidently, the church began to be ruled by

elders. For example, at the beginning, money was given to the Apostles (Acts 3:35). Later, it was given to the elders (Acts 11:29-30). Ultimately, even Peter (1 Pet. 5:1) and John (2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1), as well as Paul (cf. 1 Tim. 4:14 with 2 Tim. 1:6), identified themselves as elders, not apostles. Thus, the human authority shifted from apostle to elders.

The New Testament teaches that elders are to rule the church (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). That does not mean they were “lords” over the church (1 Pet. 5:3). When the church at Jerusalem decided to write a letter to other churches about the decision they had made, the apostles and the elders did not act as a body separate from the church; they acted in “harmonious conjunction” (Alexander) with the whole church (Acts 15:22). People are more impressed by the power of our example than the example of our power.

*The Church* The Apostles gave the “whole church” some responsibilities (Acts 6:5-6; 15:22; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 14:23). From the Scripture, what can be determined about the function of the church *as a whole*? What is the role of the whole congregation?

1. The whole church was autonomous. The first church was established at Jerusalem. After that, Acts records the conversion of various people elsewhere, but the next “church” Luke describes is at Antioch. It was founded by believers who were scattered because of persecution (Acts 8:1-4; 11:19-21).

The church at Antioch was autonomous. When the church at Jerusalem heard what happened, they sent Barnabas to encourage these new believers (Acts 11:22-24). There is no indication that the church at Jerusalem did anything other than send help. The two churches were “connected.” The church at Jerusalem sent help to the church at Antioch and the church at Antioch sent aid to the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30), but the church at Antioch acted independently from the church at Jerusalem, making their own decisions and even sending out missionaries (Acts 11:29-30; 13:1-3).

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first Missionary Journey, they “gathered the church together” and “reported all that God had done with them” without reporting to Jerusalem (Acts 14:27). In other words, the church acted autonomously. Only when men came from Jerusalem and raised a doctrinal issue (Acts 15:1), was there a suggestion that there be a meeting in Jerusalem and that was because the apostles were there (Acts 15:2). The “church” at Antioch sent a delegation, consisting of Paul, Barnabas, and others, to Jerusalem (Acts 15:3). When the delegation arrived in Jerusalem, they were “received by the church” and the apostles (15:4).

In fact, the New Testament treats each church as an autonomous unit. Ten books of the New Testament are addressed to churches (Rom.; 1 Cor.; 2 Cor.; Gal.; Eph.; Phil.; Col.; 1 Thess.; 2 Thess.; Rev.). While not directly stated, eight other books are also written to churches (Heb. 13:7; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1; 2 Pet. 3:1; 1 Jn. 2:1; 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 9; Jude 1), three of the four addressed to individuals really deal with the church (1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 1:5) and even the other one addressed to an individual mentions the church meeting in his house (Phlm. 2). The five remaining books are the four gospels and Acts.

In the New Testament, there is no authority outside the church that is over the church. The idea that an individual or a group outside the church was over the church rose after the New Testament period. It started with the claim that a bishop was different from an elder and the bishop was over the church. In the New Testament, bishop and elder are two different names for the same person (cf. Titus 1:5 with 1:7) and they came from *within* the church, not from *outside* the church.

2. The whole church selected people to serve. In Acts 6, the apostles told the congregation to select people to wait on tables (Acts 6:2-3). After a decision was made at the Jerusalem council,

“It pleased the apostles and elders, *with the whole church*, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch” (Acts 15:22, italics added). The church at Antioch sent them back to Jerusalem (see “from the brethren” in Acts 15:33). Titus was chosen by the church to help with the gift to the poor saints at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:16-19).

The church at Antioch sent out missionaries (see “they” in Acts 13:3). The pronoun “they” seems to refer to the prophets and teachers, but based on Acts 15:40, Rackham claims “the whole church” took part “in the service and dismissal, as in the ordination of the Seven at Jerusalem. Bruce concurs, saying, “The church of Antioch, through its leaders, expressed its fellowship with them and recognized them as its delegates or ‘apostles.’” He cites the fact that they are called “apostles” in Acts 14:4. Bruce goes on to say, “They were sent out by the whole church, and it was to the whole church that they made the report when, in due course, they returned to Antioch (14:26-27).” Marshall says something similar, “Since the list of names in verse 1 is primarily meant to show who was available from missionary service, and since changes of subjects are not uncommon in Greek, it is preferable to assume that Luke is thinking of an activity involving the members of the church generally; this will fit in with the fact that elsewhere similar decisions are mainly by the church as a whole (1:15; 6:2, 5; see 14:27; 15:22).”

Acts 6 is the first mention of a church organization in the New Testament. From this passage, it is obvious that the congregation as a whole was involved in the governmental process. What they did and did not do should be carefully noted.

- The “whole” church selected people to serve (Acts 6:2-3, 5).
- The selection process was based on spiritual qualifications (Acts 6:3). It was not a popularity contest.
- The selection was with the approval of the Apostles (Acts 6:3, 6). There was a division of labor between the congregation and the elders.
- The selection was to meet a ministry need (Acts 6:3). It was a simple organizational structure.

This passage illustrates that, while the congregation had a role, their part was exercised in conjunction with a group within the church (the apostles) and both the congregation and the apostles delegated the task to individuals. The individuals were responsible to see to it that their assigned task was done. Those individuals were accountable to the ones who selected and approved them.

3. The whole church was involved in church discipline (Mt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Cor. 2:6-7; 2 Thess. 3:14-15).

4. The whole church was occupied with ministry. The church prayed (Acts 2:42) and the church did the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). In the New Testament, very little is said about organization. A great deal is said about ministry. Without a doubt, the focus of the activity of the church was on ministry.

While the New Testament speaks of elders ruling, the fact that so many epistles were addressed to the whole church, that the whole church was involved in the selection of those who served, and that the whole church was involved in church discipline indicates the whole church had some involvement in and responsibility for seeing to it that the will of God was done.

For a number of reasons, a church in America should be incorporated. The Bible says that we are to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God’s. Incorporation involves Caesar. In churches that practice a congregational form of government, the

Articles of Incorporation give the ultimate human authority to the church as a whole. All the members of the church are members of the corporation and they elect corporate officers. That satisfies the biblical principle reflected in Acts 6 as well as the legal requirements under the Articles of Incorporation. If the members of the church are members of the corporation, they also have the ultimate authority over finances. On a practical level, that would mean that the church would at least approve an annual budget and have the authority to buy and sell property.

So, the biblical data concerning the church as a whole indicates that each church was autonomous, selected people to serve, and had responsibility for church discipline.

**Summary:** The head of the church is Jesus Christ, the final authority is the Scripture, and the human authority consists of elders and the whole congregation.

Is the church a democracy? No. The church was autonomous; there was no higher authority above it, but that does not mean that the church was a pure democracy. The congregation having human authority is one thing. Being a pure democracy is another. Granted, the congregation as a whole has authority, but that does not mean that the congregation as a whole makes all the decisions. It does not. The Scripture clearly teaches that a group from within the church “governs” the church (more about that in the next chapter).

Is the church a representative democracy? If “representative democracy” means that a group from within the church that governs the church is elected by the church and is accountable to the church, like secular political representative democracies, the answer is, “No.” That is backward. The New Testament does not teach that the church is over the group that governs. It teaches that the group that governs is “over” the church (1 Thess. 5:12) and the church is to submit to them and obey them. What could be clearer than, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive” (Heb. 13:17)? In political terms, the individual within the group that governs should not act like politicians; they should act like statesmen.

What, then, is the role of the congregation as a whole? The congregation has the responsibility for several major decisions, namely, 1) to select (or approve) leaders who are qualified and 2) to have ultimate control over finances. More specifically, that would mean that the church as a whole would 1) chose the pastor, 2) select the group that rules, 3) approve the annual budget, 4) buy and sell property. By making these types of major decisions, the congregation retains control of the church. It determines who makes policy decisions and how the money is to be spent.

Churches, especially those that are congregational, often get involved in decisions beyond these major issues. They should not. Why not?

In the first place, when everything the Bible has to say about church organization is considered, it becomes apparent that others have responsibilities. Church discipline is an illustration. From 1 Corinthians 6 and 2 Thessalonians 3, it might appear that the congregation did everything connected with church discipline, but that is obviously not the case. Individuals and “groups” have areas of responsibility in church discipline (Mt. 18:17; Gal. 6:1). There are divisions of labor, so to speak.

There are also practical problems. The whole church, even when it is small, is too large a group to discuss the details of many decisions. It would simply take too much time to discuss all the details publicly. So, what happens is either a few individuals thoroughly investigate an issue and make a recommendation to the congregation who trusts their judgment and approves it, or the “business” meeting goes on and on until all are satisfied that they have enough information to make an intelligent decision. When the latter course is chosen, people get bored, if not irritated, and therefore, do not attend business meetings. The few, who do, make the decisions!

Besides, some details of some decisions should not be discussed publicly anyway. There are times when personal information should be part of the decision, but it is the type of information that cannot and should not be publicly discussed.

Furthermore, not all members of the congregation are spiritually mature and some issues should only be handled by the mature (Gal. 6:1). Getz argues that the weakness of congregationalism is immature believers are involved in making decisions. A family would not allow a three-year-old to vote on whether or not the family should build a new home, nor allow a young child to vote on the family budget, nor allow a child to be part of making a decision regarding the discipline of a brother or sister (Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, p. 312). His point is legitimate, even if the analogy is not exactly analogous.

From a practical point of view, it is not only impossible for the congregation as a whole to make all the decisions, it often leads to contention, division, and church splits.

A church in the South split over how to fry chicken for the fellowship dinner. That should never have happened. The congregation should not be making those kinds of decisions.

The job of the church is not to argue over how to fry chicken. They may decide who picks the fryers, but the focus ought to be on serving the chicken.





# THE OVERSIGHT OF THE CHURCH

From the beginning and throughout the New Testament period, churches had elders. The church at Jerusalem had elders (Acts 11:30). The churches to which James wrote (about 45 AD) had elders (Jas. 5:14). The churches Paul established on his first missionary journey (48-49 AD) had elders (Acts 14:23), as did the churches he established on his second (Phil. 1:1) and third trips (Acts 20:17). After that, He gave Timothy a list of qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and instructed Titus to appoint elders (Titus 1:5). It is sometimes suggested that the organization of the church in the New Testament evolved. That is simply not true. From the beginning, there were elders. What does the New Testament say about elders?

## The Source for Elders

*A Group* Each church had a plurality of elders. Paul ordained elders (plural) in every church (singular; see Acts 14:23). James 5:14 says that if believers are sick, they are to call the elders (plural) of the church (singular). There is simply no question but that the New Testament speaks of every church having a *plurality* of elders (see also Phil. 1:1).

The fact that the term “elder” usually appears in the plural suggests that the authority of the elders is “collective rather than individual” (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1985, p. 1075). In other words, each elder does not have personal authority. The elders as a body have authority. Individuals have the authority to do the various tasks as it has been delegated to them.

*From Within* It is apparent that the elders were chosen from within each church (Acts 14:23). They were not “brought in” from outside the congregation.

## The Qualifications of Elders

The qualifications for an elder are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. From these passages, it is plain that elders were older, spiritually mature men.

*Titus* According to the passage in Titus, an elder must be blameless (Titus 1:6-7) in his family life (Titus 1:6), personal life (Titus 1:7-8), and doctrinal life (Titus 1:9), that is, he must be a devoted husband and have disciplined children. He must not be a selfish, headstrong, hotheaded, violent man. He must be a man who not only has a sense of what is right, just, and holy but also loves that which benefits others. He must be able to use the Word of God. Taken in the reverse order from the way the qualifications are given, it seems that the passage is saying that an elder is an older man who has allowed the Word of God to mold his personal life and his relationships, especially his relationships with his wife and children.

*1 Timothy* The 1 Timothy 3 passage echoes similar concepts. It uses the word “bishop” (1 Tim. 3:1), but “elder” and “bishop” are two different words for the same position (Titus 1:5, 7). In 1 Timothy 3, Paul says that an elder must desire the position (1 Tim. 3:1), be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2, not gifted to teach), not greedy for money (1 Tim. 3:3), not be a novice (1 Tim. 3:6) and have a good testimony among unbelievers (1 Tim. 3:7). His ability to rule his own home is especially emphasized (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

## The Responsibilities of Elders

*Oversight* Paul told the elders at Ephesus, “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). The Greek word translated “overseer” comes from the word “watch” and means “superintendent, guardian, overseer, bishop.” It is used five times in the New Testament (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25). The words “bishop” and “elder” are two different names for the same office. In speaking to the elders (Acts 20:17-18), Paul called them “overseers” (Acts 20:28), that is, “bishops.” In Titus, “elder” and “bishop” are used of the same person (Titus 1:5, 7).

The concept of elder has been misunderstood and abused. It has been interpreted to mean that they have all the authority in a church. In the first place, the Lord is the Overseer (1 Pet. 2:25) and the Holy Spirit made elders overseers under Him (Acts 20:28). They are accountable to the Lord. In the second place, the congregation has some areas of responsibility and, therefore, authority.

By the way, in many, if not most, Baptist churches, the congregation elects deacons, who function as elders. Calling the group within a church that “rules” deacons is not necessarily a problem (“A rose by any other name...”), except the name change causes confusion. In congregationalism, the concept is that since the congregation elected the deacons, they are representatives and servants of the congregation. Granted, the Greek word “deacon” means “servant,” but in the New Testament, every church had a group called “elders” and another group called deacons (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13). The elders “rule” and the deacons “serve.” Furthermore, the congregation is told to submit to the elders (Heb. 13:17). The elders are not told to submit to the congregation.

*Govern* The New Testament says elders “rule” the church (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Two different Greek words are translated “rule” in these passages.

The Greek word rendered “rule” in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy means to “put before, set over, preside, rule, govern, direct, maintain.” It appears eight times in the New Testament. Once it is in reference to the spiritual gift of administration (“he who leads” in Rom. 12:8). It is also translated “direct and maintain” (Titus 3:8, 14). Three times it refers to a man ruling his house (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12). Twice it refers to elders. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, it is translated those who are “over” you in the Lord.” In 1 Timothy 5:17, some elders are said to “rule” well (note that “rule” in 1 Tim. 5:12 is the same Greek word used of an elder ruling his children well in 1 Tim. 3:4-5).

The Greek word translated “rule” in Hebrews 13 means 1) think, consider, suppose, 2) lead, guide, rule, be a leader (A-S, p. 198). It denotes a more careful judgment than other words that mean “suppose, think” (A-S, p. 119). It is used 28 times in the New Testament. In 24 of these it is not speaking about elders [In 19, it has the meaning of “to think” or “suppose” (Acts 26:2; 2 Cor. 9:5; Phil. 2:3; 2:6, 2:25; 3:7, 3:8—twice; 2 Thess. 3:15; 1 Tim 1:12; 6:1; Heb. 10:29; 11:11, 11:26; Jas. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:13; 2:13; 3:9; 3:15). Twice it refers to a “chief” speaker (Acts 14:12) or “leading men” (Acts 15:22) and three times, it means to govern (Mt. 2:6; Lk. 22:26; Acts 7:10)].

Four times this Greek word for “rule” is used of elders (1 Thess. 5:13; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). In 1 Thess. 5:13, the congregation is told to “esteem them very highly,” that is, “think highly” of them. In Hebrews 13, believers are told to “remember those who rule over you” and follow their faith (13:7), to “obey those who rule over you, and be submissive” (13:17), and “greet all those who rule over you” (13:24). The idea is leading, governing.

The way that a group governs is by establishing policies. A New Testament example is the policy on caring for widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16). It has been suggested that biblical examples of “policies” include the instruction of God to Adam and Eve, the Ten Commandments, and the

sending out of the seventy. In each case, the “policy statement” explained what was *to be done* and what was *not to be done*.

*Shepherd* Paul told the elders at Ephesus that the reason the Holy Spirit had made them elders was for them to “shepherd” the church of God (Acts 20:28; see also Jn. 21:16; 1 Pet. 5:2). The Greek word translated “shepherd” means “to shepherd, tend, govern.” This shepherding includes protecting the flock from wolves (people spreading false doctrine, Acts 20:29) and seeing to it that the flock is fed (*cf.* Jn. 21:16 with 21:15 and 21:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7).

## The Appointment of Elders

Elders were appointed (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). In the New Testament, elders were appointed by apostles (Acts 14:23) or by an apostolic representative who had written authority to do so (Titus 1:5). Since there are no apostles today, how are elders selected? The New Testament does not directly answer that question. Having the congregation involved is in line with the principle in Acts 6, but in that passage, the apostles (today elders) were also involved.

**Summary:** A group of spiritually mature men from within a church should oversee, govern, and tend to the congregation.

*Legal Issues* Incorporation requires corporate officers. To satisfy this legal requirement, some churches have established a separate board often called “Trustees.”

Another possibility is to make the elders trustees. In some churches, the Pastor is the chairman of the elders, but the “lay” elders are officers of the corporation. The Pastor presides over the monthly elder's meeting and, once a year, the lay elder, who is the President of the corporation, presides over the elders who are now acting as trustees. In that meeting, the Pastor is not present and his salary is reviewed. Furthermore, if, for any reason, the Pastor is not present, the President of the corporation is the next leader in line.

*Practical Insights* A group from within the church governs the church, not an *individual from outside* or an *individual from inside* the church. There is great wisdom in having a group govern.

As Proverbs reminds us, “Where *there is* no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors *there is* safety. (Prov. 11:14). The Hebrew word translated “counsel” means “direction, counsel, guidance.” Because this proverb speaks about the guidance of “people,” it is generally taken to be a reference to the government of people, not necessarily individuals. The idea is “Without wise leadership and statesmanship, the people are bound to fall into trouble” (MacDonald). The Hebrew word translated “safety” means “deliverance, salvation.” It is used of national success in war (Prov. 24:6) as well as deliverance from personal trouble (Ps. 37:39). “In the region of ecclesiastical and political affairs; and, in general, it is found to be true that it is better with a people when they are governed according to the laws and conclusions which have resulted from the careful deliberation of many competent and authorized men than when their fate is entrusted unconditionally to one or to a few” (Keil). The church is to be governed by a group of elders (Acts 14:23).

The elders in the church are the leaders, but leaders need a leader. The practical reality is that in any group, one individual becomes the leader. Moreover, the tenor of Scripture is that God selects one man to lead. That is obviously the case in the Old Testament (Moses, Joshua, the Judges, the kings, and the prophets). It is true in the New Testament (Peter, Barnabas, James, and Paul). After the church at Ephesus was well established and already had elders, Paul wrote to

Timothy at Ephesus, not the elders. This does not mean that one individual has authority over the group. It means that one individual leads the group.

Conducting an elder's meeting by the strict application of *Robert's Rules of Order* does not always result in the collective wisdom a group of godly men should produce. *Robert's Rules of Order* mandates that there first be a motion, then debate, then a call for the question (a vote). What is wrong with this picture? For starters, it begins with a *proposal* (a motion) that, after reflection, often needs refinement (hence, amendments). Secondly, it promotes debate! In modern western democracies, that is a virtue. Debate is not a New Testament church practice. Moreover, it fosters division!

Should churches use *Robert's Rules of Order*? Yes, they should, especially in congregational meetings. In elder meetings, however, a slight modification would cut down on divisive debate and promote gathering collective wisdom. The slight adaptation would be to begin, not with a motion, but with an *issue*, which would be followed by a discussion and then a vote. (In *Robert's Rules of Order* lingo, the group becomes a "committee of the whole," then comes out of the committee of the whole and votes; that is, discussion before motion, instead of motion then discussion). This approach encourages discussion rather than debate, unity rather than division.

This is a critical issue. Too often, the "board" of a church is made up of people who 1) have been there the longest, 2) are willing to serve, 3) have money, 4) have verbal skills, 5) etc. As a result, board members come to meetings with a personal "agenda" or a burning issue that some in the congregation want done. Church polity degenerates into politics. From a New Testament point of view, the group from within the church that governs should be older, experienced, godly believers, who are there as the stewards of God (Titus 1:7) to shepherd the flock (Acts 20:28). They should be sensible (the meaning of "sober-minded" in Titus 1:8), not self-willed, or quick-tempered (Titus 1:7). As stewards, they should have the will of God foremost in their consideration. As shepherds, they should have the welfare of the flock always before them. At the same time, they should be objective and reasonable.

# THE WORK IN THE CHURCH

The New Testament mentions three more positions not yet discussed. What are they and what do they do?

## Pastor

*Pastor* The New Testament mentions “pastor” only once! The Greek word translated “pastor” means “shepherd.” It occurs 17 times in the New Testament. Eleven of those are references to a literal shepherd who tends sheep, although a few are used of a shepherd in a figurative sense (Mt. 9:36; 25:32; 26:31; Mk. 6:34; 14:27; Lk. 2:8, 2:15, 2:18, 2:20; Jn. 10:2; 10:12). Five are references to Christ as Shepherd (Jn. 10:11, 10:14, 10:16; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:26).

Only once does the New Testament use the word “pastor” of an individual in a church (Eph. 4:11). In the Greek text of Ephesians 4:11, “pastor” is inseparably linked to “teacher” (in the English text, this can be seen by the use of the word “some”). Thus, the pastor/teacher is a gifted individual, not an office. There is no office of Pastor in the New Testament.

*Teacher* In that the gift of pastor is tied so closely with teacher, there is a sense in which gifted pastor/teachers have a special place in a church. Paul says, “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” (1 Cor. 12:28). Paul’s use of “first ... second ... third ... after that ... then.” Indicates that he is not only listing gifts, but he is also ranking them in order of descending value. Paul has argued forcefully that every member is necessary (1 Cor. 12:20-24). Now, he teaches that some gifts are more important than others (also, see “best gifts” in 1 Cor. 12:31). Some of the gifts are more important in terms of the functioning of the body (1 Cor. 12:7). In other words, this passage is saying that the most important gift is apostle, the second is prophet, and the third is teacher.

Notice that there is a similar list in Ephesians 4:11, where Paul says, “He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.” There is no deliberate ranking in this passage, but again, apostle is first and prophet is second. In this list, evangelist is third, and pastor/teacher is fourth. Since apostles and prophets are foundational (Eph. 2:20) and thus no longer function, the most important gift in the church today is teacher.

*Elder* The connection of pastor and teacher implies that the pastor/teacher is a member of the elders. In terms of the organization of a church, the elders are the ones who are given the responsibility to see to it that the congregation is fed (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:7; 1 Tim. 5:17). Furthermore, all elders are to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). To say the same thing another way, the elders are to oversee, govern, and tend to the congregation, which includes teaching the Word (Heb. 13:7). That does not mean that all the elders teach (1 Tim. 5:17), but they are “able” to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). From a biblical point of view, if there is a “Pastor,” he is one of the elders. He is a teaching elder. In his commentary on 1 Timothy, Gromacki contends that the terms “bishop,” “elder,” and “pastor” are used interchangeably of the same group. He cites Acts 20:17, 28, and 1 Peter 5:1-2 as support.

Well, should churches have “elders,” who are paid? Paying the teacher is biblical (1 Tim. 5:17; Gal. 6:6). In fact, elders who serve well are to be paid double!

The question is, should there be one “elder/teacher” who is the leader? The Bible does not specifically command such an arrangement, but there seems to be examples of it. James was the “head” of the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Paul put Timothy in some kind of special position in the church at Ephesus after that church had been established for some time (1 Tim. 1:2). Titus was left on the island of Crete to set things in order and appoint elders, which certainly indicates that he was, at least, their leader (Titus 1:5). Each of the seven letters of Revelation is addressed to the “angel of the church,” not to the congregation or the elders. Since the Greek word for “angel” means “messenger,” some have argued that this indicates that each church had a Pastor. That particular argument is not conclusive because everywhere else in Revelation, where the word “angel” appears, it is a literal angel.

That one elder (“the elder/teacher” or “pastor”) is a leader of the elders in the church is consistent with the way God works. Throughout the Scripture, when God did something, He chose a single individual such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, judges, kings, and prophets. If the Scripture teaches anything by example, it teaches that God uses individuals to get His work done. The story of the Bible is the story of such individuals, including Samson, Deborah, David, John the Baptist, and the Apostle Paul.

In his book *Elders and Leaders*, Gene Getz insists there is a need for a primary leader among the elders. Conceding that there is little data for such a function in the New Testament, he argues it is accurate from a “total a biblical perspective” (Getz, p. 217). In the Gospels, Jesus is the leader and while He selected twelve, He equipped Peter to be the primary leader. Peter is mentioned specifically in fifty-seven events, while Andrew is only mentioned in eight (Getz, p. 218). When Matthew lists the twelve apostles, he says “first” there was “Peter” (Mt. 10:2) and when Luke mentions the ministry of Peter and John, he always lists Peter first (Acts 3:1; 3:3, 3:11; 4:1, 4:3, 4:7, 4:13, 4:19, 4:23; Getz, p. 225, fn.). Peter was the leader in Acts 1 and in Acts 2. James was the leader of the elders in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17).

From a biblical perspective, leaders are servant-leaders (Mk. 10:45). They are not to be lords over the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).

*Practical Insights* The practical reality is that groups are led by individuals. In his book *People of the Lie*, Scott Peck says, “Assemble any small group of strangers—say a dozen or so—and almost the very first thing that happens is that one or two of them rapidly assume the role of group leader. It does not happen by a rational process of conscious election; it just happens naturally—spontaneously and unconsciously.”

The elders may be the leaders in the church, but the nature of groups is that one leader will lead the leaders. God has chosen to put one head on each body. Anything with two heads belongs in a sideshow.

The way the modern autonomous church is organized, the Pastor is the teacher and the leader of the church. When the system works according to its design, the Pastor leads the flock and the flock follows the shepherd.

That is not to say that the Pastor is a dictator. He is not. He is an elder who is accountable to the group of elders who rule as a group. The elders as a group are given the oversight of the church. As a group, they should advise and consent as well as approve.

On the other hand, when for whatever reason, an individual or a group of individuals in the church opposes the direction in which the Pastor wants to go, if it is not resolved properly, it will lead to tension, strife, stalemate, and even division. In other words, the individual leader, the elders, and for that matter, the whole congregation must work in harmony and resolve differences in an orderly manner.

A retired minister, who had served the Lord for decades, told a congregation, “Find God’s man and follow him.”

## Deacons

*The Title* Deacons are also mentioned as part of the church. The Greek word translated “deacon” means “servant, attendant, minister.” It is used in The New Testament of servants in general (for example, Jn. 2:5) and is only used a few times as a technical term for a position in the church (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). One passage simply says that a church had elders and deacons (Phil. 1:1); another gives a list of qualifications for the position (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

In Romans 16:1, Paul commends Phoebe who is identified as “our sister,” that is, a member of the Christian family and as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea,” which was the port of Corinth (Acts 18:18). The Greek word rendered “servant” is the word for “servant,” but since in the masculine form, it is also used in the New Testament as a technical term for deacon, some have concluded that Phoebe was a deaconess. If there was such a position, this is the only place in the New Testament where it is mentioned, which would certainly be strange. The absence of qualifications for deaconess in 1 Timothy 3 indicates that no such position existed.

*The Qualifications* The qualifications are similar to those of an elder, with more emphasis on the mouth of him and his wife (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

*The Function* Apart from Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, nothing is specifically said in the New Testament about the position of deacon. Some suggest that Acts 6:1-6 is referring to deacons because the verb form of the word “deacon” appears in the phrase “serve tables” (Acts 6:2). The problem with that explanation is that they are not called deacons and later in Acts, Philip is called one of the seven, not one of the deacons (Acts 21:8). The deacons are certainly not a body or board that governs. Elders do that. The only thing that is known from the Scriptures about deacons is that their name means “servant.”

*Practical Insights* Do deacons carry out the functions of the church? Does this mean that all who serve in a church should meet the qualifications of a deacon?

Is it not significant that in Acts 6, a need arose that was considered a responsibility of the congregation and they gave that function to a group of qualified individuals with the approval of a group that governed at the time (Apostles, later elders)? Perhaps, the application of that concept today would be to create groups of servants (deacons, “ministry teams”) based on the functions of the church.

As Paul would say, “Does not nature itself teach that one individual will end up leading any group?” Then, why not form “ministry teams” and designate one individual as the “leader” (coordinator) of the group?

## Ministers

There is one more position mentioned in the Bible. It is minister. Paul says, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13). According to this passage, all

believers are in the ministry! The job of the pastor is to equip believers so that they can do the work of the ministry.

**Summary:** The pastor/teacher, elders, deacons, and all believers do the work in a church.

Taking the Scripture and the Articles of Incorporation into consideration, as a practical suggestion, the congregation is given the authority to call the Pastor, elect (or affirm) elders, approve the annual budget, and buy and sell the property. The elders have the oversight, govern, and shepherd the flock. Legally, they are trustees. The Pastor is the leader of the leaders, teaches, and equips. Teams of individuals do the work. Each team should have a leader, perhaps, called a deacon. In light of the fact that God uses individuals to get His work done, the leader of those teams should have accountability to the elders, responsibility, authority to carry out their responsibility, and the freedom to do it.

I once pastored a church that had a Minister of Music and an organist. During a time when we were looking for a Minister of Music, the organist resigned. Some of the elders wanted us to hire an organist. I suggested that we not do that until we had a Minister of Music. My reasoning was that we were going to give the Minister of Music the responsibility of the music in our church and, if at all possible, he should be given the opportunity to select the new organist. That idea prevailed and it worked well.

Elders should have oversight. Pastors should lead, but neither should micro-manage the ministry. As much as possible, people should be given the responsibility to ministry and the freedom to do it.



# GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH LIVING

There are a number of guidelines given in the Scripture that the whole congregation, elders, pastors, deacons, and all others should keep in mind at all times in the church.

## Glorify God

*Glorify God* According to the Scripture everything everyone does should be done to the Glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Certainly, that principle should apply to a church. In fact, when Paul wrote a book about the church, he spoke several times about things being done by God for His glory (Eph. 1:6, 14).

As has been pointed out, glorifying God is manifesting, showing, demonstrating, declaring what God is like (Jn. 16:14). God is Holy (Lev. 11:45) and God is Love (1 Jn. 4:7). Everything every believer does should be done to reflect the holiness, righteousness, and justice of God on the one hand and the love, grace, and mercy of God on the other. We are to glorify God by responding to the Lord Jesus Christ through exalting Him, exemplifying Him, edifying His church, and evangelizing His world.

*Be on Guard* Sounds like a no-brainer, doesn't it? It isn't. There are dangers in being a believer in a church. Satan is alive and hangs around churches.

Believers are out of balance. To adapt an expression, some Christians are left-brained (love) and some are right-brained (justice). All believers should be using the whole brain!

Every decision leaders make should be based on the holiness and love of God. They must constantly ask, "What is the right thing to do and what is the loving thing to do?" Everything everybody does in the church should be done with both sides of the brain in gear.

Even the godliest people still have a sinful nature. Christians are not always Christ-like. There are people in churches who are more committed to their glory than God's glory. They want things done their way, not God's way. They want the credit and if they are not given credit, they get offended. Of course, they do not say that and many of them do not think it of themselves. They have a blind spot.

A very common form of this is that people believe that their church is biblical. Therefore, the way they do things is biblical. Hence, change is unbiblical and, therefore, unthinkable. People in a church need to constantly ask, "Are we defending tradition, or maintaining the status quo as a substitute for manifesting what God is really like?"

A man who wanted to put his child in a Christian school visited one to see what it was like. He asked two faculty members this question: "What is the ultimate goal of our education?" He thought he had tipped his hand with the word "ultimate." They smiled as though they had been waiting for this question. They answered, "Our goal in this institution is to train the minds of young people so that they will think critically and become fully human." His response was, "I thought maybe the mission statement of a Christian school would be different than an atheistic school. I just thought you'd say, 'To glorify God and enjoy him forever,' or something like that." They were shocked and said, "Oh, we assume that." What he did not say but thought was, "God does not like to be assumed."

## Live in Unity

*Live in Unity* In the church, believers are to endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Paul exhorts, “Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Unity necessitates submission. After commanding unity (Phil. 2:1-3), Paul adds, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4; see also 1 Pet. 5:5).

“We have never achieved perfect unity in a local church any more than any of us has been completely transformed into the image of Christ” (Truman Dollar).

*Be on Guard* There are all kinds of ways to be divisive in a church. Some people who have seen a successful program in one church move to another and try to make the successful program in their former church work in their new church. That may or may not work. Churches have different locations, personalities, and ministries.

Some believers are divisive with their tongues. We should think before we speak. Alan Redpath said, “I once formed a mutual encouragement fellowship at a time of stress in one of my pastorates. The members subscribed to a simple formula applied before speaking of any person or subject that was perhaps controversial, that is, THINK. T—is it True? H—is it Helpful? I—is it Inspiring? N—is it Necessary? K—is it Kind? If what I am about to say does not pass those tests, I will keep my mouth shut! And it worked!”

Before 911, America was divided. The presidential election just before 911 was as divisive as any in American history. After 911, America was as united as it had been since World War II. Why? We were united because we had common goals, helping the survivors and stopping terrorists.

## Minister to One Another

*Be Organized.* The church is not an organization; it is an organism, a living organism described as a body and a bride. It has to have organization, but it is not an organization. The organization ought to be simple: overseer and servants!

In the structure of most churches today, so much time is spent in board meetings and committee meetings that time and effort is taken from the ministry itself. Boards and committees are man-made devices that slow progress and often become ends in themselves. There is no such thing in the New Testament as a committee member, only servants.

*Ministry* Paul said believers are to be equipped to minister (Eph. 4:11-13). The church should concentrate on ministry. *The focus of the activity of the church in the New Testament is on ministry.*

You will either minister or try to manipulate others to minister to you.

Worst yet, we tolerate each other; we do not minister to each other. Josh McDowell writes:

Tolerance says, “You must approve of what I do.” Love responds, “I must do something harder: I will love you, even when your behavior offends me.”

Tolerance says, "You must agree with me." Love responds, "I must do something harder: I will tell you the truth because I am convinced the truth will set you free."

Tolerance says, "You must allow me to have my way." Love responds, "I must do something harder: I will plead with you to follow the right way because I believe you are worth the risk."

Tolerance seeks to be inoffensive; love takes risks. Tolerance glorifies division; love seeks unity. Tolerance costs nothing; love costs everything.

A coach of a NCAA basketball Final Four team was asked, "Why has your team done so well? What is it about this team that has made it come as far as it has?" He said, "We have a motto on our team, and the motto is this: 'Good people do for themselves; great people do for others.'"

**Summary:** The guidelines for living together in a church are: glorify God, live in unity, and minister to one another.

As someone has said, when it comes to church government, "peace and concord, kindness, and goodwill are indispensable."

Herman Ostry's barn floor was under 29 inches of water because of a rising creek. The Bruno, Nebraska, farmer invited a few friends to a barn-raising. He needed to move his entire 17,000-pound barn to a new foundation more than 143 feet away. His son Mike devised a latticework of steel tubing, and nailed, bolted, and welded it on the inside and the outside of the barn. Hundreds of handles were attached. After one practice lift, 344 volunteers slowly walked the barn up a slight incline, each supporting less than fifty pounds. In just three minutes, the barn was on its new foundation.

The body of Christ can accomplish great things when it works together.



# Conclusion

In respect to church organization and government, the New Testament speaks of “the whole church,” elders, and deacons.

## The Whole Church

The ultimate *human* authority in the church is the whole congregation (Acts 6:2-5; 15:22). Basically, the New Testament is addressed to churches. The “whole church” selected people to serve and had the ultimate responsibility for church discipline.

That does not mean that the whole congregation has all authority or can do anything it wishes. Christ is the head of the church. The church is to see to it that His will is done. The Bible is the final authority for faith and practice. The presence of a group within the church that is said to rule the church indicates that the whole church did not make all the decisions or for that matter, have *all* human authority. The whole church is clearly told to submit to those who have the rule over them (Heb. 13:17). So, while in a sense the ultimate human authority is the whole church, their authority is limited.

Practically, if the whole congregation selected or approved the leaders, approved the annual budget, and retained the power to buy and sell property, they are the ultimate human authority.

## Elders

A group within the church governs the church. At first, that group was the Apostles (Acts 6:1-6). Later it became the elders. The side-by-side existence of the Apostles and elders can be seen in their actions together in Acts 15:22. Later, Peter calls himself an elder, not an apostle (1 Pet. 5:1).

Therefore, elders are to govern the church (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). The fact that the term “elders” always appears in the plural suggests that the authority of the elders is collective rather than an individual.

All elders are equal; they have authority as a group. At the same time, leaders have a leader. The leader of the elders does not have “more authority,” but the leader presides. As a body has one head, so a group will have one recognized leader. James was “head” of the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Timothy held some kind of a special position in the well-established church at Ephesus, as indicated by the fact that the 1 Timothy, written about how to conduct the church (1 Tim. 3:15), is addressed to him. Titus was even given authority to appoint elders at the newly formed church on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). The gift of teacher is the most important gift in the church today (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20) and the elders who labor in the Word and teach are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17).

Elders cannot do anything they wish. They are not dictators, individually or collectively. They are not to be lords over the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). They are overseers to shepherd the flock (Acts 20:28). Furthermore, the Apostles, who were later replaced by the elders, delegated responsibility, at least some authority, to the others (Acts 6:1-6).

So, on the one hand, they have oversight, but on the other hand, they do not micro-manage. In management terms of today, they establish policies and see to it that the policies are carried out properly. The directives concerning the support of widows are an example (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

## Deacons

Deacons serve. Perhaps, they serve as a “ministry team” to fulfill a particular function. Or, maybe, they are leaders of a team whose job, it is to fulfill a ministry.

**Summary:** The “whole church” is the ultimate human authority in a limited sense, but the elders govern the church, overseeing the ministry delegated to deacons.

Everyone is to serve. All are to dwell in unity. The elders and the congregation should work together in harmony (Acts 15:22) to get the will of God done to the glory of God.

In his commentary on the book of Acts, Rackham comments on the decision made by the apostle, the elders, and the whole church in Acts 15. He says, “In the procedure also we recognize the church acting as a whole in due order. In all great societies, however democratic in their constitution, the practical administration of affairs must fall into the hands of a smaller or selected assembly, such as the Greek *Boule* and the Roman *Senate*, the Jewish *Sanhedrin*, and the modern *Parliament*. Similarly, in these bodies, the initiative and control centers in a small committee of the leaders, whether magistrates or high-priests, or cabinet ministers. So in the church, we find the same three elements: (1) the multitude, (2) the senate of apostles and presbyters, (3) the apostles. Only there is this difference. The two smaller bodies possess, besides their authority of personal influence, a definite commission received from above by the apostles from the Lord directly, by the presbyters from the apostles through laying on of hands. Now in the council, we see the three elements cooperating in their due order. (1) The senate of apostles and presbyters is summoned (verse 6): it is mainly their business as the responsible authorities to discuss the matter, and they give their opinions or votes (verses 22 and 12 Bezan): the letter of the council runs in their name. (2) But in this senate, the apostles take the leading part. They sum up the discussion at the end, and their speeches, which are recorded alone, decide the voice of the assembly. Further, we learn from S. Paul that they had previously discussed with him in private the more doctrinal side of the matter, his gospel, and come to an agreement thereupon. (3) The popular element is not wanting, viz. ‘the multitude’ of so to speak enfranchised citizens of the church. They are present (see p. 249), and their consent is emphatically expressed (verse 22): without it, the mind of the whole church would not have been expressed. There was still (4) a further body to consider, the church of Antioch, which represents distant churches who must have a voice in the decision if it is to be the mind of the universal church. This church was represented by delegates; and besides this, the decision was sent to it in the form of a letter for its acceptance. The brethren of Antioch accepted it with joy. What would have happened if they had refused we are not told” (Rackham, p. 268, italics his). Rackham goes on to say there is an interesting parallel in 2 Chronicles 30.

# APPENDIX 1: A STUDY OF ELDERS

This brief study of the subject of elders begins in the Old Testament, surveys elders in the church, and attempts to answer several questions about elders.

## History of Elders

According to the New Testament, elders are to have oversight of the church (Acts 20:17, 28), but the concept of “elder” existed long before the New Testament period. There were elders in the Old Testament!

When they were slaves in Egypt, Israel had elders (Ex. 3:16). When Moses felt the burdens of leadership too heavy for him to bear by himself, seventy elders were appointed and granted a share of the Spirit of God (Num. 11:16-30). Every village and city had its elders; they met at the gate of the village or city and dispensed justice to the people (Deut. 25:7). Elders became a permanent part of the nation of Israel. Elders were advisers to kings (1 Kings 20:8, 21:11) and friends of the prophets (2 Kings 6:32). They were colleagues of the princes in the administration of the affairs of the nation (Ezra 10:8).

During the exile, they became aristocrats, part of the nobility. In the time of Christ, local Sanhedrins were composed of 23 elders. They explained the Law of Moses and punish those who broke it. In Jerusalem, seventy comprised the great Synagogue, including chief priests and scribes (Lk. 22:66). Elders sentenced Stephen to death (Acts 6:12, 15; 7:54-60).

Barclay points out, “The elders were the administrators of the synagogue; they did not preach, but they saw to the good government and the order of the synagogue, and they exercised discipline over its members. The elders formed a large section of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews, and they are regularly mentioned along with the Chief Priests and the rulers and the Scribes and the Pharisees (Matthew 16: 21; 21:33; 26:3, 57; 27:1, 3; Luke 7:3; Acts 4:5; 6:11; 24:1). In the vision of the Revelation in the heavenly places, there are twenty-four elders around the throne. It is clear that the elders are woven into the very structure of Judaism, both in its civil and its religious affairs.” He adds, “When a man enters the eldership, no small honor is conferred upon him, for he is entering on the oldest religious office in the world, an office whose history can be traced through Christianity and Judaism for four thousand years” (Barclay on 1 Peter 5:1).

Adams says, “An elder (the word signifies one who is experienced or mature in the faith) is a ruling (or ruling/teaching) leader of the church. The one unchangeable office, that continued throughout the O.T. and was perpetuated in the N.T., is the eldership. In O.T. times, whether there was a theocracy or a monarchy, there was an eldership (lit., presbytery). Whether the Jews were in the land of Palestine or in exile or in dispersion, there was an eldership. Whether the temple was the center of worship with its many officers or whether there was worship conducted in synagogues, there was an eldership. And the same office —with Christian modifications — continued right into the book of Acts and the epistles without the blinking of an eyelash, just as smoothly as possible” (Adams on 1 Pet. 5:1).

## The Title of Spiritual Leaders

Chronologically, the first mention of the elders in the church is in Acts 11 (45 AD). Paul and Barnabas delivered money from the church in Antioch to the elders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30). About the same time (45 AD), James instructed believers to call for the elders of the church to pray for them that they were sick (Jas. 5:14). A few years later (48/49 AD), Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the newly found churches in Galicia (Acts 14:23). In 49 AD, the apostles the elders functioned together to resolve the controversy over the Law (Acts 15:1, 4, 6, 22, 23) and for the next several years (49-52 AD), Paul, Silas, and Timothy delivered that decision to churches (Acts 16:4).

Sometime later (57 AD), when Paul addressed the elders at Ephesus, he used the terms “elder” and “overseer” (bishop) interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28). In writing to the church at Philippi (61 AD), Paul calls the leaders of the church “bishops (overseers) and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). In the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Timothy (62 AD) and Titus (62 AD), Paul used “elder” and “bishop” (overseer) interchangeably (1 Tim. 3:1-2; 5:17-20; Titus 1:5), as did Peter (63/64 AD) in his first epistle (1 Pet. 5:1-2).

In his book *Elders and Leaders*, Gene Getz points out that the Romans used the title “overseers” to refer to the superintendent or leader of a colony. He suggests that Paul borrowed the term from the Roman culture but totally redefined the function associated with the position. He also says that when there was a strong mixture of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul identified spiritual leaders as both “elders” and “overseers” (Getz, p. 186).

When the church began in Jerusalem, it was led by the Apostles (6:2, 6), but it soon had elders (Acts 11:30). Thus, from the beginning and throughout the New Testament period, churches had elders. The churches to which James wrote (about 45 AD) had elders (Jas. 5:14). The churches Paul established on his first missionary journey (48-49 AD) had elders (Acts 14:23), as did the churches he established on his second (Phil. 1:1) and third trips (Acts 20:17). After that, He gave Timothy a list of qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and instructed Titus to appoint elders (Titus 1:5). Peter (1 Pet. 5:1) and John (2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1) identified themselves as elders, not Apostles.

## The Selection

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (Acts 14:23). Paul told Titus to appoint them (Titus 1:5). Apart from those two references, nothing is said in the New Testament about the *selection* of elders.

When Paul gave Timothy and Titus instructions concerning the selection of elders, he wrote an elder must want the position (1 Tim. 3:1) and meet character qualifications (1 Tim. 3, Titus 1).

In the New Testament, spiritual leaders were appointed by spiritual leaders. In a sense, “it takes one to know one.”

## Practical Questions

The New Testament provides a broad framework for elders; it does not contain a detailed plan. It is safe to assume that within the biblical framework, there is freedom. If God wanted a particular



specific plan to be implemented, He would have said so. Nevertheless, godly wisdom is needed to answer important details concerning elders.

1. How old should elders be? Unlike the Constitution of the United States, the New Testament does not designate a specific age qualification for elder. The title “elder” implies an older man, but it does not designate a particular age. Paul called himself “the aged” and used this same word (Phlm. 9). A. T. Robertson, a Greek scholar, says that Hippocrates called a man by this word when he was from forty-nine to fifty-six years of age. Perhaps, Paul had in mind someone fifty years of age or older. Since men live longer today, maybe sixty or sixty-five is analogous to Paul’s situation.

On the other hand, Paul left Timothy in charge at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). In his book *Elders and Leaders*, Gene Getz estimates that Timothy was approximately 33 when Paul left him at Ephesus to select and appoint elders (Getz, p. 289). Perhaps, that is why Paul told Timothy, “Let no one despise your youth” (1 Tim. 4:12a). The Greek word translated “youth” was applied to people until they were forty years old (Kent). Paul met Timothy on his second missionary journey, which was from 50 to 52 AD and invited him to accompany him on the remainder of the trip (Acts 16:1-4). Timothy was probably in his twenties at that time. Paul wrote 1 Timothy in 62 AD. So, when Paul speaks of Timothy’s youth here, Timothy was “at least thirty” (Kent), “between thirty and forty” (Hiebert), “probably closer to thirty-five” (Gromacki), “somewhere between 34 and 39 years of age” (Hendriksen). (In his book, *Historical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, William Ramsay has a chapter entitled “The Age of Timothy.”)

While age is a factor, the critical issue is maturity. Older men without spiritual maturity are not qualified to be elders. Getz says, “There is nothing more divisive than a 50 or 60-year-old man who has covered up his insecurities with control tactics. Normally this becomes obvious when he is opinionated, defensive, and unwilling to admit mistakes” (Getz, p. 292). “Younger” men who have spiritual maturity and wisdom can apparently serve as elders.

2. How large should the group of the elders in a church be? The New Testament is silent concerning this question. From a New Testament point of view, the first and foremost issue is qualifications, quality, not quantity. Since the New Testament speaks of “elders” (plural), there should be at least two or three. No doubt, the size of the congregation is a factor. Larger churches probably need more elders than smaller churches.

The number of elders in the church can be too large to function effectively. The larger the group, the more time it takes to discuss an issue. If each of 12 elders spoke for five minutes on a question before the group, it would take an hour—for just that one round on one item! Also, the larger the group, the more absenteeism is a problem.



## APPENDIX 2: PATTERN OR PRINCIPLES

The question is, “Do the practices in the New Testament constitute a *pattern* that must be adopted, or do they give *principles* that can be adapted?” How much of the biblical practice is required? Is there any freedom? If so, how much?

### The Practices

*Meetings* The early church met in homes (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phlm. 2).

*Baptism* In the New Testament, baptism was by immersion in water (Acts 8:38-39).

*The Lord’s Supper* Churches had a love feast, that is, a meal (1 Cor. 11:21; Jude 12) *every* Sunday (Acts 20:7), when they observed the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 11:20).

*Elders* Each church had a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23).

*Giving* In the first church, which was in Jerusalem, all the believers sold everything and gave it to the church (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35).

### The Problem

*Meetings* Is meeting in homes a *pattern* that must always be followed? Or is the *principle*, “Don’t forsake the assembling of yourselves together,” which would allow a church to meet somewhere beside a home? While it is true that they met in homes (Acts 2:46), they also met in the Temple (Acts 2:46), synagogues (Acts 19:8), and even a school (Acts 19:9-10). So, at least on the issue of where to meet, there was flexibility.

*Baptism* Is baptism by immersion a pattern that must be followed? Is pouring or sprinkling acceptable? Is there another way to illustrate leaving the old life and entering a new one? Suppose that rather than being dipped in water, the candidate publicly entered a closet in old clothes, changed clothes, and emerged in new clothes? (Charles C. Ryrie. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1986, p. 403). Would that do?

*The Lord’s Supper* How much of the New Testament practice of the Lord’s Supper is a model that must be followed? Or are there principles that are the issue? Must church have a love feast? Must a church observe the Lord’s Table *every* Sunday or does “as often as you do it” allow for less frequent observances, say once a month or once a quarter? They used wine in the cup of the Lord’s Supper. Will grape juice do?

*Elders* Is having elders a pattern? Must every church have a group of men called elders? Or is the principle that a group within the church, by whatever name they are called, be responsible for certain things? Can women be a part of this group?

On at least some of these issues, there is flexibility (meetings). Does that mean there is flexibility on other issues? What is the criterion for determining what is pattern (required) and what is principle (freedom)? Obviously, individuals and churches must decide for themselves and not all will agree on any one solution. Churches have split and denominations have been formed over these issues.

*Giving* Is the Jerusalem practice of giving the pattern that must be followed? Luke records what they did. “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common and sold their

possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Later Luke relates, “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power, the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid *them* at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need” (Acts 4:32-35).

Apparently, the Jerusalem practice was not the pattern. Still later in Acts, concerning the church in Antioch, Luke says, “The disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea” (Acts 11:29). Evidently, the church at Antioch did not follow the practice of giving used at Jerusalem. Had they given everything to the church, they would not have had anything to give! Likewise, the believers at Corinthian (1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 9:7) and the believers at Galatia (Gal. 6:6) had money to give.

The conclusion is that even within the New Testament, not all the practices of the church were followed as a pattern (meetings and giving). On the other hand, this is no indication in the New Testament that the other practices changed (the mode of baptism, the love feast in connection with the Lord’s Table, and the plurality of elders).

In the case of the governance of the church, if the pattern is not followed, at least, the principle is that the “whole church” is the ultimate human authority in a limited sense and a “group within” the church governs the church, overseeing the ministry delegated to others.