

What in the World Is the Church to Be?, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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INTRODUCTION

The description of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 gives us a basic outline of what God intends the church of Jesus Christ to be: "[It] continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. "

A. The Invisible Church

We who love Jesus Christ constitute the true church. We belong to the collective Body of Christ whether we're alive or in glory. The Greek word for church is ekklesia, which means "an assembly of called-out ones. " The church is made up of people called by God to be His children. We have become united with all other believers by faith in Christ, who said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Jesus meant He would gather together a body of believers. He wasn't talking about buildings; He was talking about people. We who know and love Him are the living church that has been born into the family of God by the Holy Spirit. As members of "the general assembly and church of the first-born, who are written in heaven" (Heb. 12:23), we have been declared righteous because our sin has been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:5).

B. The Visible Church

The world cannot detect the invisible church of real Christians. They see only the visible church of those who profess to be Christians. The Lord intended for there to be a visible church for a testimony to the world. When we gather together on the Lord's Day, we are a testimony to the world that Christ has indeed risen.

Some say we don't need any buildings or organizational structure. However, I don't think Christ would have agreed. In Matthew 18 He implies that the church would meet together in a given place: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church" (vv. 15-17, emphasis added). He must have been referring to a visible group of people, even though the church did not officially begin until Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). In the context of Matthew 18, we see the church as a visible assembly of believers engaged in the discipline process.

In the book of Acts we see the invisible church become more visible. Although the visible and invisible church were initially the same, the picture changed as false believers associated with the church. Today there are visible congregations meeting that are not the true church at all. Rather, they are part of the false church, which is called "the great harlot" (Rev. 17:1). The invisible church became visible as believers began to gather together. Originally they met in homes, but by the third century the church was meeting in its own building as it continued to grow.

Let's examine three biblical aspects of the church: the founding of the church, the ministry of the church, and the leadership of the church. Although there are new ways to communicate, new methods to use, and new problems to deal with in the twentieth century, I believe the Lord intends the church of this century to follow the same basic principles that the first-century church did. Lesson

I. THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH

A. Its Members

The first local assembly met in Jerusalem. It consisted primarily of humble people: fishermen, farmers, and other poor people. Obviously some were well off since they had goods they were willing to share with the tremendous number of needy people in the church (Acts 2:44-45).

Furthermore, since Christians were ostracized for their faith in Christ, it was also necessary for them to share among themselves.

Incidentally, having all things in common was not the normal practice of any other church mentioned in the book of Acts. It was practiced in Jerusalem only because of the tremendous number of poor believers and the unusual circumstances of the church there.

B. Its Beginning

The church at Jerusalem was born in a prayer meeting on the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit came and filled those who were waiting in an upper room. As a result, they experienced a dramatic manifestation of the unity of the Spirit and the love of Christ, which caused the church to grow rapidly. In fact, it acquired 3,000 new Christians on the first day (Acts 2:41).

How did that happen so fast? The ministry of the Holy Spirit brought it all to pass in a unique way. When the 3,000 were saved--many of whom were visiting from other places--they returned to their homes, and even more were added to the rapidly growing church. That was one way that the church spread throughout the land of Israel.

C. Its Makeup

Acts 2:42 gives the basic ingredients of church life: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread [communion], and in prayers." The only other thing you can add to that was the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ. They proclaimed it in the streets, in the Temple, in homes, and everywhere they had an opportunity. As a result, "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (v. 47). They had all the ingredients they needed to have a God-blessed, Spirit-directed church. There were no gimmicks. The Holy Spirit directed the ministry and the people followed His leading.

Today churches often use gimmicks and entertainment to try to get people into church. That indicates the people there aren't following the biblical pattern or depending on the Spirit's leading. The church at Jerusalem had a social life--it wasn't all business without any fellowship. They had the love-feast, which was the early church's version of a pot-luck dinner. Unfortunately the church at Corinth had problems with that practice: the rich were eating their own pot-luck dishes and allowing the poor to go hungry. The ministry of sharing food and fellowship at the love-feast deteriorated into a selfish ordeal--a problem Paul had to correct (1 Cor. 11:17-34). Nevertheless in the beginning, the church met together for fellowship around the table and ate together, sharing their food. People freely ministered to each other.

Did the Early Church Live in Communes?

The church was never designed to be a commune, and that is not a New Testament concept. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and promised to give the proceeds to the Lord (vv. 1-2). However, they lied about the amount they sold it for and gave only a portion to the church, claiming it was the full price (v. 2). When Peter confronted their sin he said, "While it remained, was it not thine own?" (v. 4). That statement reveals there was no injunction for believers to sell their property and turn it over to the church. Peter never expected them or other believers to turn over all

their assets to the church. The problem was not that they "lied unto men, but unto God" (v. 4). The problem was not that they sold their property and didn't give all the money to God--He didn't require that. The problem was that they claimed they would give Him a certain amount but didn't. They tried to give a false impression to the church without any regard for God. Since the church was newly founded and discipline had to be strict, they were both killed instantly for lying to the Holy Spirit.

D. Its Leadership

1. Spiritual delegation

The twelve apostles led the early church until it spread out and elders and deacons were trained to lead and serve in other congregations. They were with the Jerusalem church for at least seven years and did all the work, including serving food, until they chose seven men to help relieve them of that responsibility (Acts 6:1-6). Some of these men had developed to the place of spiritual leadership and maturity that they became evangelists and teaching pastors (vv. 7-8).

2. Spirit-led direction

After several years, the apostles were ready to send out other leaders to establish and minister to new churches. In fact, they nurtured the Jerusalem church for seven years before they sent people out to minister elsewhere. You can imagine that when Christianity started at a such a small place, the apostles would have been anxious to see it spread around the world. Yet in the Spirit's wisdom, they waited for the His direction to begin an official missionary outreach.

The apostle Paul, Silas, Barnabas, and others planted several independent churches. Since each church was ultimately led by the Holy Spirit, they were one in the Spirit. The early Christians had a common bond. In Romans 16:16 Paul says, "The churches of Christ greet you. " There was a oneness among the independent congregations. They were composed of Jews and Gentiles and all classes of believers: rich, poor, educated, and uneducated. Christians from a wide spectrum of society were functioning together as one. The only organizational structure they had was that which was instituted by the Holy Spirit.

The church has changed a great deal over the centuries. It has become very complex and businesslike. Today it is a massive organization with denominations, commissions, committees, councils, boards, and programs. It quite often functions like a business rather than a body, a factory rather than a family, and a corporation rather than a community.

The church today has also become obsessed with success, establishing superficial goals and awarding prizes to those who can pack the most people into the pews on Sundays. When the teaching is insipid or when there are spiritual problems. Rather, they panic when the line starts dropping on the graph, indicating a drop in attendance and finances.

Churches have become entertainment centers, giving performances to placid piles of unproductive churchgoers. Most of the devices are geared to get people into church, but not to do something with them once they come.

II. THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

I want to look at three New Testament Epistles--1 and 2 Timothy and Titus--because they tell us what the ministry and organizational structure of the church should be. Timothy and Titus were evangelists. In the early church, an evangelist was a church planter who went to an area where there were no Christians, won some people to Christ, and established a congregation. Usually he would remain with that congregation as long as a year and maybe even longer, until he had taught them sufficiently. When some of them had matured, he would then appoint elders in that city to care for the church and teach it. Then he would move to another place and do the same thing all over again.

The letters to Timothy and Titus establish the pattern for the church's behavior. For example, Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly; but if I

tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

A. The Pattern Established

The basic task of the church is to teach sound doctrine. It is not to give some pastor's opinion, recite tear-jerking illustrations that play on your emotions, raise funds, present programs and entertainment, or give weekly devotionals.

1. Titus 2:1--"Speak thou the things which become sound doctrine. " Evangelists like Titus moved into an area and taught sound doctrine to a newly established church.

2. 1 Timothy 1:3, 6-7, 10--Paul said to Timothy, "Charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (v. 3). When a church doesn't have a constant diet of sound doctrine, some people turn "aside unto vain jangling" (v. 6)--they follow every new idea that comes along. They desire "to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say, nor that about which they affirm" (v. 7). If sound doctrine isn't taught, the people will gravitate to teaching that isn't sound.

The Greek word translated "sound doctrine" in verse 10 means "healthy" (we get the English word hygienic from it). Sound doctrine from the Word of God builds the Body of Christ. Any other kind of doctrine tears it apart and has no place in the church.

How to Protect a Church Against False Doctrine

First Timothy 4:1-2 says, "The Spirit speaketh expressly that, in the latter times, some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron. " How can the church be protected from seducing spirits and doctrines of demons?

1. The protection of preaching

Verses 6-7 say, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, unto which thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. " The only way a church can protect itself from false doctrine is by nourishing the people in sound doctrine.

2. The pattern of preaching

Verse 13 says, "Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. " Those three elements form the essence of preaching: reading Scripture, declaring it, and explaining it. That's what expository preaching is all about. An expository preacher must read and explain the text, then exhort his congregation to follow the principles contained in it, telling them how. The Greek word translated "reading" refers to the public reading of Scripture associated with a preaching ministry.

3. The preparation for preaching

Verse 15 says, "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them. " The leadership of the church is to be engaged in a concentrated study of the Word of God, not in anything else. Rather than be distracted by a multitude of extraneous activities, the leaders are to be absorbed in doctrine.

4. The priority of preaching

Verse 16 says, "Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee. " Demonic teachers who attempt to infiltrate the church will be cast aside when the church is faithfully involved in teaching sound doctrine. Pastors are to give themselves fully to teaching the truth.

If the church of Jesus Christ is to be protected from false doctrine, the elders who lead it must be faithful to teach sound doctrine. Many other things are good, but they're not priorities. As a minister of Jesus Christ, I am first of all responsible to God for the purity of the church and its protection from false doctrine. All ministers of the gospel are answerable to Christ for how faithfully they protect and nurture the flock. Unfortunately, there are many pastors whose churches expect them to do everything but what Christ intends--teaching the Word of God. Their energies are dissipated into

other duties rather than their prime duty.

B. The Practice Exhorted

1. 2 Timothy 1:13-14--"Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Spirit, who dwelleth in us. " The Greek word translated "form" implies that the regular practice of instruction for the church should be teaching sound words.

2. 2 Timothy 2:1-2--"Thou, therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. " A pastor teaches his congregation sound doctrine so they can teach it to others. The elders are to help the saints mature so they can do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-12).

3. 2 Timothy 2:15--"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. " The effective ministry is centered on teaching doctrine, and the key is diligent study.

4. 2 Timothy 2:24-25--"The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose him, if God, perhaps, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. " Don't correct people with a belligerent attitude; rather show love and meekness.

5. 2 Timothy 3:14-17--"Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them, and that from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. " If Christians are to become spiritually mature, then church leaders must preach from all of Scripture.

6. 2 Timothy 4:1-2--"I charge thee, therefore, before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be diligent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. "

The ministry of the church is simple: preaching sound doctrine in the pattern of the early evangelists.

III. THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

A. The Categories of Leadership

There are two categories of leaders in the church: elders and deacons.

1. Elders

a) Their responsibilities In the New Testament church, the leadership belonged collectively to a group of elders who were leaders under the Spirit of God. One man was not responsible for doing everything. The pastor is not the professional problem solver who runs around with an ecclesiastical bag of tools, waiting for the next problem to repair or the next squeaky wheel to grease. An elder is also referred to as a "bishop" in the New Testament. Elder emphasizes his title and bishop, meaning "overseer," refers to his duty. He oversees the flock. His is a spiritual ministry concerned with two things: prayer and teaching God's Word. (1) Making godly decisions The elders who rule in the local church are first responsible to Christ--not to the congregation or some council. First Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. " Not all are necessarily involved in teaching doctrine; there are other capacities in the design of the Spirit. All of them, however, are responsible for making decisions after prayer and Bible study so they can be made unanimously with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16) in the energy of the Spirit. Only then can they lead the church with positive effects for the entire congregation. Ruling as an elder is a high calling. (2) Defending the Word Titus 1:9-11 says an elder

should be "holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to confute the opposers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. " The elders are to keep false teachers out. (3) Disciplining wayward members Elders are to discipline Christians who fall into doctrinal error. Second Timothy 2:17-18 speaks of the destructive teaching of "Hymenaeus and Philetus, who, concerning the truth, have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. " Paul recognized that as a serious problem that had to be dealt with. First Timothy 1:19 records how he dealt with Hymenaeus and Alexander: "I have delivered [them] unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme. " When a person teaches doctrinal error, he is to be put out of the fellowship until Satan has brought him to the place where he is willing to abandon his error. Then God can begin to restore him. First Timothy 5:20 says, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. " Elders have the right and the obligation to rebuke sin publicly. b) Their qualifications Elders were ordained in every city where there was a church (Titus 1:5). They were chosen out of the congregation. A church is strongest, I'm convinced, when its own people rise to its leadership. (1) As listed in 1 Timothy 3 First Timothy 3 lists what is required of an elder: "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless [he must have a good reputation among believers], the husband of one wife [faithful to his one and only wife], temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach [able to communicate his faith]; not given [addicted] to wine, not violent, not greedy of filthy lucre [money], but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity [seriousness] (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?); not a novice [recent convert], lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (vv. 2-7). The highest position of authority in the church belongs to elders, who rule under Christ, the Great Shepherd, as His undershepherds (1 Pet. 5:2-4). They are responsible for teaching doctrine, administering, disciplining, protecting the flock, praying for the flock, and studying the Word of God. They are answerable to Jesus Christ for their ministry.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In what sense is the true church invisible? What people constitute the church of Jesus Christ?
2. Why did the Lord intend for there to be a visible church? How does Matthew 18 support that?
3. Although the invisible and visible churches were initially the same, what caused them to become different?
4. What type of people did the Jerusalem church primarily consist of? Why was it necessary for that church to share their possessions? Was that degree of sharing a common practice in any other church in the book of Acts?
5. Explain how the church at Jerusalem was born. How was it able to spread throughout the land of Israel at such an early stage?
6. What were the four basic ingredients of church life according to Acts 2:42? What other thing could be added to that?
7. Why do some churches resort to using gimmicks and entertainment? What does that indicate?
8. Explain how Acts 5 verifies that the Jerusalem church did not practice communal living where the members forfeited their own possessions.
9. Who were the first leaders of the early church? As the church spread out, who were chosen and trained to lead and serve in other congregations?
10. Did the Jerusalem church immediately send out leaders to establish and strengthen other churches? Explain.

11. How has the church changed over the centuries?
12. Describe the function of an evangelist in the early church.
13. What is the basic task of the church? Support your answer with Scripture.
14. What does sound doctrine do for the Body of Christ? What will any other kind of doctrine do?
15. How can a church be protected against false doctrine?
16. What does Ephesians 4:11-12 say about the ministry of elders?
17. What are the two offices of leadership in the church today? To which office does the word bishop refer?
18. Who are the elders that rule in the local church responsible to?
19. How should elders make decisions?
20. What is the ministry of elders regarding discipline?

Pondering the Principles

1. Is the church you attend continuing "steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42)? In which areas do you think it needs to be strengthened? How can you help to strengthen the weak areas? Can you pray, make suggestions, participate on a committee, or serve as an elder or deacon? How does your personal walk with the Lord rate in each of those four areas? Be sure to study Scripture on a regular basis and not just rely on the weekly sermon. Take advantage of fellowship opportunities with other Christians, make it a point to participate in the Lord's Table on a regular basis, and be sure to pray for your church and pastor. Be all you can be as an individual Christian and your church will be sure to benefit.
2. Paul said to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV). Are you letting Scripture thoroughly equip you by reading it, meditating on it, and studying it? Since God's plan is for us to live righteously, daily exercise your mind with God's Word so you can be trained in righteousness. Meditate on Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:1-3, and James 1:21-25.

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