



Learning about the Church

LEARNING ABOUT THE CHURCH

1. INTRODUCTION

The church *of* the New Testament was not a building at the corner of the road, but a group *of* God's people gathered together, properly taught and shepherded, loving and serving the lord and each other, and being a blessing to the community in which they lived.

The New Testament says nothing about times *of* church services, organisations, by which name it should be called, or its architecture. However, it does have a *great* deal to say about the people *of* which it is comprised; the quality *of* love and life that should be there; it speaks about leadership, discipline, serving, giving, unity, praying, teaching and so on.

These *are* some *of* the things which *are* vital to its life and which we shall now look at, and how we are trying to practise these things at the New Testament Church of God.

2. A STRUCTURED CHURCH

Scripture dearly states that the lord Jesus is the head of His church (Ephesians 1:22 - 23)

This is seen in the New Testament where the church was united in Christ and was one in doctrine, life and practice, despite the fact that it existed in many countries, cultures and nationalities. The Lord Jesus exercised His care *of* and authority over, the church by giving particular ministries.

When the lord ascended into Heaven, He gave His church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Read Ephesians 4: 11 - 13.

Nowadays we are more familiar with terms like bishop, cardinal, curate, minister, Pope, priest, rector, vicar, etc. many *of* which are not mentioned in Scripture and result from centuries of confusion throughout the church's history.

Let us look at the ministries given in Ephesians. 4:11:

"It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers."

APOSTLES

The New Testament shows us what a key role the Apostles had in the building of the church. Their ministry was foundational. In 1Corinthians 3:10, Paul describes his apostolic *ministry*:

"By the *grace* God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder..."

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Paul sees the church at Corinth as proof of his apostleship - in other words, the fact that a church had been planted and established was proof of his ability to build.

His foundation laying had four main aspects:

(a) Birth of new works

Establishing churches where none previously existed. Look at just two, of many, examples found in Acts chapters 17 and 18 where it is recorded that the churches at Thessalonica and Corinth were established. Acts 14:3 tells us that the Lord confirmed the message taken by Paul and Barnabas by "Enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders." (See also Acts 19:11).

God did extra-ordinary miracles through Paul, (Acts 19:11)

(b) Doctrinal Teaching

Making sure that people were firmly rooted in Christ, declaring to them the mysteries of Christ (Ephesians 3:5)

Bringing corrective teaching if the churches began to drift away from the truth (the letter to the Galatians church is an example of this).

(c) Conduct

Making sure that their life style was in keeping with the teaching that had been given.

(d) Eldership Appointment

The elders in local churches were not 'self appointed' leaders - the churches had the security of having men set forth into their ministry either by the apostles (Acts 14:23) or those delegated to them, e.g. Titus (Titus 1:5)

PROPHETS

These are men who usually work alongside the apostles and they, together with the apostles, are involved in laying foundations (Ephesians 2:20). Prophets give direction and encouragement to the churches, and because they are 'see-ers' their ministry helps to give insight and understanding about the things God wants done in the church.

The prophet is like the architect, he has the plan. The apostle is like the builder who turns the plan into an actual building.

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EVANGELISTS

Evangelism is the natural expression of the life of the church and every believer should share his faith and seek to bring others to the Saviour. Evangelism is not primarily the work of 'specialists', but some were called and endowed by the Holy Spirit and were so effective in this work that they were recognised as evangelists. His over-riding concern is the salvation of souls. He will have success in his personal ministry, both to individuals and to groups, and he will also stimulate this ministry in others.

Philip is an example of such an evangelistic ministry (Acts 8). You will notice he preached to many as well as to an individual; often this was accompanied by miraculous signs such as healings and deliverance. This ministry, as with all the others in Ephesians 4 is primarily to the church as is designed to 'prepare God's people for works of service', or in this case 'works of evangelism'.

PASTORS

The Greek word for pastor means 'shepherd-feeder'. The Eastern shepherd led the flock by going in front of the sheep, seeking good pasture, giving protection, wisely caring for the whole flock. Ezekiel 34 contains a very full description of this function. The Lord Jesus is the example of this shepherding care (John 10).

TEACHERS

These are men who are responsible for giving teaching and instruction. The Christian life is not a 'do it yourself religion. God has spoken! He has given us clear commands which are to be obeyed. There are principles for living Godly lives which need to be put into practice. We need teaching about life, money, love, family, work, worship, relationship, etc.

The two ministries of pastor and teacher are so akin that it is possible that both are combined in the same person.

CONCLUSION

Having given all these ministries to the church, the Lord Jesus fulfilled all of them himself.

Normally these men, whilst perhaps having a specially close relationship with a local church would have a sphere of influence far wider than that - this would be especially true of apostles, prophets and evangelists, and all would probably work in a team setting with the apostle. It is this ministry, described in Ephesians 4 which brings order, direction, strength, growth and unity to the local churches.

Look up these references and write against each one the appropriate gift from Ephesians 4:11; Hebrews 3:1; John 10:11; Acts 3:22; Luke 9:6; John 13: 13. The New Testament Church of God is seeking to follow this New Testament pattern and to recognise and work with similar churches.

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3. LOCAL CHURCH STRUCTURE

(A) What is a local church?

Local churches are situated in towns and areas where believers living in the same locality can come together to form a congregation under properly constituted leadership. The local church is not everyone who attends a place of worship. It comprises only those who have been truly converted to God and committed to each other and to God's appointed leadership to form a 'body of Christ' in a locality.

(B) Who are the leaders?

The Lord Jesus is head of the church. There is no earthly or human head. Having said this, the church is not a free-for-all; that would lead to chaos! The Lord himself has given authority to men to rule and shepherd His flock. In practice, this means that God raises up from among the congregation a man of spiritual gift and ability who has a loving and caring heart and a real desire to serve God's people. Such a person would be recognised by the church and would be set apart for this ministry of service by the laying on of hands of other leaders.

See Acts 13:3; 14:23 and Titus 1:5

In the New Testament Church of God we are seeking to recognise such men who will be appointed in order that they might serve the Lord and His people. There *will* be:-

ELDERS - who are responsible for the whole church and its teaching, spiritual oversight, praying for the sick and discipline. They exercise a type of pastor/teaching ministry. The character of elders is described in 1 Timothy 3:1 - 7 and Titus 1:5 - 9.

The main requirements are:

- (i) Proven godly character
- (ii) An ability to shepherd his own family
- (iii) An ability in the Word to teach and refute error
- (iv) An ability to lead, rule or manage the flock, to give clear direction and right judgements.

Elders are appointed and are not elected by the people (Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5).

Each local church should have a plurality of elders (Acts 20: 17).

In practice it is usually a matter of recognising the obvious. Elders are not all equal but have a variety of gifts among them. The eldership is not a managing committee but a group of men submitted to one another with one man recognised among them as having the final authority, e.g. James at Jerusalem (Acts 15). This would normally be the pastor. Assisting these elders in their ministry are:-

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HOUSEGROUP LEADERS - who work directly under the elders in the care and teaching and have responsibility for a small group of people within the church.

DEACONS - There are many important, practical matters in church life where able men and women can support the elders. Things like administration, finance, maintenance of buildings, cleaning, stewarding, etc. In some areas, small teams of people are involved, thus giving opportunity for many to serve one another in love. Deacons do not have a ruling function.

(C) **How are leaders to exercise their ministry?**

Not in a crushing and overbearing manner, but in the same way as the Lord Jesus. Look at these scriptures:-

2 Corinthians 10:8; John 13:1-17; 1 Peter 5:2-3; John 21:15-17

This is the kind of leadership God wants in His church. Leaders therefore are to:-

SHEPHERD - that is feed, protect, lead, be an example

RULE - that is exercise godly discipline

OVERSEE - that is watch over the people's lives, their doctrine, etc.

(D) **What kind of response will God require of those who are members of His church?**

Look at the following scriptures and pick out the key words which show what that response should be:-

1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17

God wants His people to receive and benefit from the ministries He has set in the church. As in a well ordered family, authority is there, not to suppress the children or destroy their initiative, but to help them grow up into full maturity and responsible adulthood.

Jesus' Lordship extends to every area of our lives and we would hope that you would want those in leadership to extend their care toward you and your whole life.

Do you see the rightness of this kind of discipling?

Are there any areas of your life that you feel should be excluded from the care, correction and help of the pastor and elders?
