

The Church of the New Testament was an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit. But then everything the Spirit does is extra ordinary. It grew and spread at an exponential rate. There was a hunger to know and understand not only the teachings of Jesus, but what His death and resurrection meant. Love became the defining characteristic of the groups of believers in Jesus, and that love won more and more people to the Way. (John 13:35; Acts 9:2) At first the believers worshiped in the synagogues, but as they shared about Jesus as fulfillment of the prophecies of Messiah, Jesus words came to pass. ² *They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.* John 16:2 (NIV)

Groups of believers that met in homes sprang up in city after city. When a home became too small for the number of believers, a new house would be made available and there would be two house churches. (Romans 16:5) As the believers were increasingly non-Jewish and spread into the Roman Empire, new difficulties arose. Everything from home life to trade guilds to civic life was centered around one of a number of gods to whom you offered a pinch of incense before meetings began. Christians could no longer feign worship to these false gods (1John 5:21), so they were rejected by their families, work guilds, and eventually even by the government. No wonder they became known as the church (ekklesia), which means "the called out ones". It cost a great deal to become a Christian, yet Christianity thrived and spread. (Acts 2:47)

How did those home gatherings function? Did they organize in some way or was it a free for all? If we find the New Testament church, established by the work of the Holy Spirit, was structured in a certain way, do we have the option of changing it? If we do, then to what degree? Though the church is made up of believers in Jesus Christ, and though believers organize themselves in different ways, what is God's way?

Certainly we should not change fundamental beliefs in the person and work of Christ. We have creeds that sum up the basics of our faith. In these creeds, government is not mentioned. We must understand then that we are studying something that is not central to our faith and which should not be a divisive issue. Yet, if the Holy Spirit led the Apostles to establish a form of government, can we assume that there is a reason for that form? Should we endeavor to stay with that pattern that the Spirit revealed to the Apostles as much as is possible in our culture and situation? If it is irrelevant, then we should change the topic for next week and continue with a short history lesson. If it is significant and was revealed to help us avoid error, and that is the case with all of Scripture (2Timothy 3:16), then we should carefully search the Scriptures to see what we can learn about it.

Before we look at the Scriptures dealing with church government, we should understand a point that **is** in our creeds, the priesthood of the believer. This was one of the greatest discoveries of the Reformation. (1Peter 2:5,9) This concept is important to understand when considering church government. We should not be

Commented [notes1]: John 13:35 (NIV)
35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Commented [notes2]: Acts 9:2 (NIV)
2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Commented [notes3]: Romans 16:5 (NIV)
5 Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Commented [notes4]: 1 John 5:21 (NIV)
21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

Commented [notes5]: Acts 2:47 (KJV)
47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church (ekklesia, "number" NIV) daily such as should be saved.

Commented [notes6]: 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV)
16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Commented [notes7]: 1 Peter 2:5 (NIV)
5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Commented [notes8]: 1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)
9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

seeking to place priests in office, for a priest is a mediator between God and man, and all believers now have the privilege to go directly to God. The veil was torn (Mark 15:38) and we can enter into God's presence because of Jesus' righteousness that is credited to us. (Hebrews 4:16)

During the Old Testament era we had priests that represented us to God, and prophets who were the voice of God. God had promised through the prophets that the day would come when He would personally live with us. Christ's atonement made that possible and the promised Holy Spirit was sent. Now we read the Word and pray and the Spirit speaks to our hearts and teaches us directly. Our High Priest is Jesus. (Hebrews 4:14) He is the only mediator between God and us. (1 Timothy 2:5) We each can stand before God because of what Christ has done for us. We need no man to represent us except the One who bears the marks that paid for our sins. You can hear from God just as well as any pastor.

The other important factor to keep in mind is that God's ways are different from man's ways. (Isaiah 55:8) If man were to organize a church, you would have a CEO, a board that gave special attention to the main investors or acted on their vote, and hired employees whose main job was to increase the productivity or membership of the organization. Oops! I think I accidentally described 90% of church governments.

In case you need your memory refreshed on God's ways being different from man's, consider the following. Man would never have put the no-no tree in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:17), or built a boat to hold all the animals when they'd never seen rain (Genesis 6:13-14), or left Ur to go to an as yet undisclosed location (Genesis 12:1), left the security of Egypt to follow a cloud in the desert with a million people (Exodus 13:21), entered the Promised Land (we almost got our own way with that one (Numbers 13:33)), taken on army 450 times larger (Judges 8:11), or believe in a crucified Messiah (1 Corinthians 1:23), or spread the story of Him at the constant risk of your own life, or love others and deny yourself (Matthew 16:24). It just isn't human nature. So though we are priests, now that the Spirit has come, mankind also has a difficult time doing things God's way. We see a great potential for good, and for evil. I won't go into the many examples of man making the wrong choices, even "Christian" men. You are surely familiar with numerous examples in the Bible and in history.

The best thing we can possibly do is let God lead. His Word says we can be co-laborers with Him. (1 Corinthians 3:9) He picks the job and the method, and we join Him in what He is doing. Scripture gives us the guidelines to recognize if we are going the right way. This is what we already know to be the will of God. So what has He revealed in His word as to the nature of church structure? We don't find any detailed instructions, but there are many clues. Lets examine them one at a time and see if we can draw out information that we could apply.

John Legg, in his paper on Eldership: The Biblical Doctrine, written in 1969, states that "...there is to be found in the Bible a divinely ordained system of church government. I do not claim that every detail is to be found laid down, even to Sunday services at 11 a.m. and 6.30 p.m., but I do claim that what we find is a

Commented [notes9]: Mark 15:38 (NIV)
38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Commented [notes10]: Hebrews 4:16 (NIV)
16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Commented [notes11]: Hebrews 4:14 (NIV)
14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

Commented [notes12]: 1 Timothy 2:5 (NIV)
5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

Commented [notes13]: Isaiah 55:8 (NIV)
8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

Commented [notes14]: Genesis 2:17 (NIV)
17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."

Commented [notes15]: Genesis 6:13-14 (NIV)
13 So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.
14 So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out.

Commented [notes16]: Genesis 12:1 (NIV)
1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

Commented [notes17]: Exodus 13:21 (NIV)
21 By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.

Commented [notes18]: Numbers 13:33 (NIV)
33 We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

Commented [notes19]: Judges 8:10 (NIV)
10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples; a hundred and twenty thousand swordsmen had fallen.

Commented [notes20]: 1 Corinthians 1:23 (NIV)
23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

Commented [notes21]: Matthew 16:24 (NIV)
24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Commented [notes22]: 1 Corinthians 3:9 (NIV)
9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

pattern and a sufficient one. We must assert that what we find in the pages of Scripture is for our use and that having discovered, as best we can, the Apostolic practice, it is our duty to follow it."

The church was founded by the Apostles. (2Peter 3:2) The word "apostle" can mean an official representative, but in regards to the twelve disciples of Jesus, it came to mean those who conveyed His life's message and were witnesses to the resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22) Some churches today use the title for their uppermost hierarchy, but certainly we can say that those with the title today are not the ones who conveyed to us the eyewitness account that became known as the Apostles' teaching. (Acts 2:42) There is no record of how to appoint an Apostle. It is my opinion that the office ceased with the death of John the Beloved. He was the last eyewitness to convey the teachings of Jesus and witness of His resurrection from the dead.

What we do find are instructions to appoint elders (plural) in every town (singular). Titus 1:5 (ESV) ⁵ *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—* When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, he gave a list of qualifications of elders that they were to appoint. We should also note that the congregation did not vote on who would be their elder. Why would that not be the case?

Though each believer in the congregation should be a vessel of the Holy Spirit and in tune with the Holy Spirit, these were new churches with many new believers. Spiritual immaturity means that a vote would tend toward who was popular or who you personally liked rather than who fit the qualifications. The solution was to have the Apostle's representative discern who was qualified and appoint them. They had spent time in these places and knew the men there. (1Timothy 3:10; 5:22) They did not choose them the first time through but on the return trip. Maybe they wanted to see how they did in their absence before appointing them. Then with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they put their trust. When was the last time you saw men pray and fast over the appointment of men to a church office? Do we take it that seriously?

Since we no longer have Apostles or their representatives, who would be least likely to lean on man's ways and most likely to look to the Lord in prayer and fasting? Who are the spiritually mature in your congregation? It should be your elders. They should watch individual member's maturity level and the knowledge of the Word and love expressed, the testimony of each life and consider who might be added to the elders. Elders act as elders before they are given the title. Their primary focus should be the Word of God and prayer. (Acts 6:4)

The terms bishop or overseer (*episkopous*) and elder (*presbuteros*) and pastor or shepherd (*poimen*) are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17,28, Titus 1:5,7, and 1Peter 5:1-2. They are simply different titles for the same office. The term elders is always plural and the implications are that they hold an equal standing. We never find a letter from Paul to the Senior Pastor of any city. We never find a letter to a staff. Paul never asked to meet with any one head of any individual church but

Commented [notes23]: 2 Peter 3:2 (NIV)
2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

Commented [notes24]: Acts 1:21-22 (NIV)
21 Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,
22 beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

Commented [notes25]: Acts 2:42 (NIV)
42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Commented [notes26]: 1 Timothy 3:10 (NIV)
10 They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

Commented [notes27]: 1 Timothy 5:22 (NIV)
22 Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.

Commented [notes28]: Acts 6:4 (NIV)
4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Commented [notes29]: Acts 20:17 (NIV)
17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

Commented [notes30]: Acts 20:28 (NIV)
28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Commented [notes31]: Titus 1:5 (NIV)
5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

Commented [notes32]: Titus 1:7 (NIV)
7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

Commented [notes33]: 1 Peter 5:1-2 (NIV)
1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:
2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

instead met with the elders of the church. (Acts 20:17) Though there is evidence of someone leading the elders in the position of what became known as the “first among equals”, the one who may have done the majority of the preaching when they assembled, the elders were equal and accountable to one another. They recognized that the head of the Church is Jesus Christ and not an individual. (Ephesians 5:23)

Commented [notes34]: Acts 20:17 (NIV)
17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

Commented [notes35]: Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)
23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

The qualifications for an elder are laid out in Titus (our text for today) and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. They are almost identical. I’ll combine them so as to give the fullest description. They are to be blameless, in other words not having any valid accusations against their character in the community or the church. They are to be husbands of one wife, which has also been translated as a one woman kind of man, disciplined, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, gentle, not quick tempered, not greedy for money, to manage their family well, with obedient children, not a recent convert, with a good reputation in the world, not overbearing, loving what is good, holding firmly to the message, and holy.

Well, with that description, we can say that there is no one qualified in our congregation including myself. When I first talked to some of our elders about becoming an elder, and read over these qualifications, every one of them said they did not qualify. I like that, because it’s honest. If someone thought they fit the bill, I’d be concerned that they lack humility and therefore should not be an elder. This description is the goal, a goal we should all strive toward. Elders will be men that come as close as possible to that goal.

Here is how John’s disciple Polycarp described the office: ⁶ *And let the presbyters (elders) be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgment; keeping far off from all covetousness, not quickly crediting an evil report against anyone, not severe in judgment, as knowing that we are all under a debt of sin.”*

The early church father Clement described the office like this: Clement wrote: ⁴⁴ *Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate (office of elder). For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those (ministers) already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when they should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit, and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all, cannot be justly dismissed from the ministry. For our sin will not be small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties.*

Though this is not Scripture, it is Scriptural and gives us a very early indication of how the church was led. The elders nominated new elders to take the place of those who went to be with the Lord and the church would consent or not to their appointment.

You may wonder why we are spending the time to learn about the government of the early church. Our annual meeting is coming up in which we are going to propose some changes to our by-laws. We want you to understand why we are making the suggestions that we will make. Though some churches have other governmental systems, our desire is to be as close to that of the New Testament church as possible as it is the design of the Holy Spirit. The further we get from the original, the more of man's input and design enter in.

The wisdom of the Holy Spirit in His design should be obvious to us. If the elders are in unity, watching over the flock together, there is the joint wisdom and safeguard of the multitude of counselors. (Proverbs 11:14) If something should happen to one of them, including the one who does most of the speaking, the others can carry on without a change in vision or direction. The flock will be looked after. If one of them is out of line in his teaching or lifestyle, the others can correct him or ask him to step down. (2Peter 2:1) When a single individual is in charge of everything, the enemy has a single target that can nearly destroy a church as many of us have witnessed.

You might ask, "What does that have to do with me?" I'm not in that position. Well, first of all, knowing that this is the God given design for the church government, it should guide you in seeking out a church should you move to another area. Secondly, it should remind us that we do not look to man but to the Lord Himself to be the head of the church. Finally, it should cause each of us to ask, "What is my place in the body. The elders have this role, but what is my role? What gifts and leadings is the Lord giving me that will help to build up others in the church?" (1Corinthians 12:7) Every gift is for the building up of the body. Finally if you have a need, if you want some direction through godly spiritual counsel, you can go to any of the elders. They are here to help you. Godly leaders are servants. (Matthew 23:11)

Would our elders please stand. We are your servants. We want to be all that God has called us to be. If you want prayer for a situation or illness, come to us. That is what the Scriptures tell us to do. (James 5:14) If you would like a visit, ask one of us.

Pray for us that we would not rely on our own strength, but on the Lord. Pray that we will lead according to the direction of the Holy Spirit and be the example that we should be. I can tell you that every time we meet, we have a sense God's direction in prayer, and in the vast majority of issues that arise we are in complete unity about the Lord's leading. That is one of the reasons the Lord keeps blessing this congregation. We are trying to function according to God's direction in His Word. That is something you can apply to your own life. Do things God's way, and you will experience His blessing. Amen?

Commented [notes36]: Proverbs 11:14 (KJV)
14 Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.

Commented [notes37]: 2 Peter 2:1 (KJV)
1 But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

Commented [notes38]: 1 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV)
7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Commented [notes39]: Matthew 23:11 (NIV)
11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

Commented [notes40]: James 5:14 (NIV)
14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.