

13 The church

Not far from where we live there is a farm with Jersey cows. The milk from these animals is used to produce wonderful ice cream in dozens of flavours.

If anyone were to count up how many flavours the Christian church comes in, the result would be anything but wonderful. Jesus prayed for believers ‘that all of them may be one’ (John 17:21). Externally, they are far from being this. Someone parodied the hymn ‘Onward Christian soldiers’ to read:

*We are not united,
Not one body, we.*

I heard a clergyman denounce this situation. The Methodists should rejoin the Anglican church, he said, and then the pair of them should rejoin the Catholics, who were there before them. And the new churches ought never to have come into existence.

The ecumenical movement has long campaigned for such amalgamations. Of course, the Bible tells us very little directly about denominations or what to do about it once they have sprung up. Nevertheless, there is much in the Bible to show how the church used to function from its origination. Perhaps we have been used to getting our information about the church from our own denominations or traditions. It would be instructive if we could get it straight from the Bible.

The denomination tree

The present situation with the Christian church reminds me of a wide-spreading tree. It started in New Testament times with one trunk. Now each denomination is like a branch. These branches have grown out from the trunk, each spreading further from the trunk but in different directions, so that besides moving further from the trunk they are also moving further from each other.

Now the branches have what the trunk (as far as we can tell) never had. There are church buildings, special vestments, rules, liturgies and ceremonies. Denomination differs from denomination in these added features, of which the Bible says little or nothing. These things are the traditions of these denominations.

On this picture of the tree, the suggestion of the ecumenical movement is that those on one branch should jump sideways on to another. Then those on that branch should jump again, until all Christians are safely on one branch. They should agree on one set of traditions.

The difficulty here is that no branch is what the trunk was. All denominations have diverged in some shape or form from the simple Christianity of the New Testament. What is more, the reason why new branches have grown is because people have seen that existing branches are diverging from the trunk. You are asking people to jump back on to the branch which their forefathers left on the

grounds of principle and conscience. Is this really the way to advance Christian unity?

In actual fact, true Christian unity is to be organic, not organisational. There may be members of a particular denomination, who have an organisational oneness in that they belong to the same church, but who are engaged in bitter factional fighting amongst themselves. Is this what Jesus wanted to see when he prayed ‘that all of them may be one’ (John 17:21)?

Whatever structure, organisation or traditions we have in our churches, the key feature of church life should not be these things, but our love for one another. ‘As I have loved you,’ says Jesus, ‘so you must love one another’ (John 13:34). This is to be the identifying feature of Christians. ‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (v. 35).

Form and function

In this chapter we will look at the way churches operated in early times, sweeping through the whole New Testament and gleaning what information we can from it.

One difficulty must be dealt with at the outset. When we are confronted with a new type of church, our natural tendency is to concentrate on the outward forms and appearances. What form of church government do they follow? Do they have an organ or guitars? What hymn book do they use? Do they follow a liturgy? Use candles? Incense? An overhead projector?

What is more important than the form of a church is the way it functions. How does it represent the body of Christ on earth? Are people brought into a loving relationship with God and with one another? Is there true worship in the Holy Spirit? Are believers built up on the scriptures? Is the church reaching out effectively to those round about?

No matter how hard you try, form cannot take the place of function. No arrangement of canals and pipes can possibly bring water when there is none. However, if there is water, the arrangement of piping may hinder its flow. In the same way, form cannot supply what only function can give. The most you can expect of form is that it should not hinder function.

So we will look at the form of New Testament churches, seeking to understand the way they functioned.

The local church

Centralised control is at the root of much of the system of denominations. Churches in most denominations are answerable to their central authority. Because each grouping of churches has a different central authority, the denominations are separate. The ecumenical movement would like to see a single central authority. We must now examine whether this was the situation which existed in the early church. Were the local churches part of a hierarchical interconnected structure with

authority coming from a central body, or, if not, to what extent were they autonomous and self-governing?

In Acts 15 we find Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, having returned from their missionary journey among the Gentiles, being challenged by strict Jews who wanted to see the Gentile converts circumcised and taught to keep the law of Moses. It was decided that Paul and Barnabas with some other representatives should go to Jerusalem to ask the apostles (the ‘Twelve’) and the elders of the Jerusalem church about this matter. The subsequent meeting was what is now known as ‘the council of Jerusalem’. Does this passage mean that the leaders in Jerusalem governed churches such as Antioch? Was there centralised control?

One does not need to suppose such control to justify a matter like this being referred to Jerusalem. The twelve who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry were there. The elders of the Jerusalem church were the longest serving leaders of the first church in existence. The New Testament scriptures were not available for consultation. It is therefore not surprising that such an important matter should be referred to those who knew most about the origins of Christianity.

The subsequent letter to be sent to Gentile churches gives no indication of continuing control. Beyond the moderate advice, the conclusion is (Acts 15:28): *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.*

Would not centralised control over all churches mean the imposition of further requirements and greater burdens than this?

However, you may consider that certain leaders had control over a number of churches, and so there must have been a hierarchy within the church. We must look at the function of some of those leaders.

Peter and the local churches

Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, and was specifically blessed by Christ at that time (Matthew 16:17–19). In particular, Christ said, ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church’ (v. 18) and ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven’ (v. 19). Some have seen in these words a declaration that Peter would be the earthly leader of the worldwide church, exercising centralised control. We need to look carefully into this matter, and consider the context of other parts of the New Testament.

Some have suggested that the rock on which the church is built is not Peter but his confession of Jesus as the Christ. However, Ephesians 2:20 describes the church as being ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.’ The church was built on Peter, but not on Peter alone. It was Peter who delivered the sermon in Acts 2 which was used by God to bring many to salvation, and to build the church in Jerusalem. In one sense, it could be said that in this sermon Peter used the keys of the kingdom of heaven to open the door to those who would respond. However, Jesus promised all his disciples,

‘Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’ (Matthew 18:18), so Peter’s ministry was not unique in this.

In Galatians 2:11–14 we find Peter criticised by Paul for his inconsistency. In Antioch Peter had eaten with the Gentiles, but when certain strict Jews came from the apostle James, Peter separated himself from the Gentiles. This certainly does not give the impression of a leader in overall control of all the churches.

In Galatians 2:7–9 Paul records the outcome of his meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem. It was agreed that Paul should carry the gospel to the Gentiles, and James, Peter and John should take the gospel to the Jews. Verse 7 notes that ‘Peter had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Jews.’ Once again, we do not see Peter as the overall leader of all the churches, Jewish and Gentile.

There is no indication to be readily seen in the New Testament that Peter had particular responsibility for a group of churches. What is more, nothing is said to show that Peter’s position in the church would be handed on to a successor. If Peter had overall control of all the local churches, and if in this way one man was to exercise centralised control throughout the ages, one would expect the New Testament to give details of how the leadership was to be passed on.

Paul and the local churches

It is obvious that Paul was concerned for a number of churches. When listing the problems he has encountered, he concludes, ‘Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches’ (2 Corinthians 11:28). His epistles show that besides a pastoral concern for these various churches, he also had an authority to wield over them. He speaks of ‘the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down’ (2 Corinthians 10:8). This was not simply an authority over the Corinthian church. He could give commands to the Thessalonians also (2 Thessalonians 3:6–15). He directed Titus to put in order what was defective in the church in Crete and to appoint elders there (Titus 1:5).

Does this indicate centralised control over a group of churches? Not necessarily. It must be remembered that Paul was the one who preached the gospel to these people in the first place, and through whom the churches came into being. He was eager to revisit the churches to see how they were faring (Acts 15:36). When it was obvious that his final visit had been paid, he summoned the elders of Ephesus to a meeting in Miletus, and gave them his parting injunctions (Acts 20:17–38). When he was not able to visit churches, he wrote to them instead.

In fact, Paul was exercising the role of the church planter or missionary. A missionary should be rather like the scaffolding around a building. When the structure is in place and functioning, the scaffolding is to be taken away. We are not given any hint that in the future the ministry which Paul exercised for the churches he had planted was to be carried on by anyone else. It was a temporary task, only necessary until the churches could stand on their own feet.

The alternative interpretation is that there was a group of ‘Paul’s churches’, with Paul as the head. This would mean that there were other groups of churches, with other apostles in charge of them. Could Paul have been happy with such a situation? Hardly so, if you read what he says in 1 Corinthians 1:12 about those who say ‘I follow Paul’ or ‘I follow Apollos’ or ‘I follow Cephas [Peter]’ or ‘I follow Christ’.

The evidence seems to point to Paul having temporary pastoral oversight over the churches which he had planted, until such time as these churches could stand on their own feet as independent congregations.

Bishops and the local churches

At the present day, in some denominations, the people who have charge of a number of churches are called bishops. The New Testament certainly speaks about bishops. Are we therefore to conclude that the New Testament envisages people who have control over a number of churches?

There are two terms used in the epistles, ‘bishop’ and ‘elder’. The Greek for ‘bishop’ is *episkopos* (from which we get words such as ‘episcopal’), which means ‘an overseer’ (*epi* meaning ‘upon’ or ‘over’, and *skopos* being at the root of English words for seeing, such as ‘microscope’ and ‘telescope’). The Greek for the word ‘elder’ is *presbuteros* (from which we get words such as ‘presbyterian’), which means ‘older one’.

It is clear that ‘elder’ and ‘overseer’ refer to the same office. In Titus 1:5 Paul reminds Titus that he left him in Crete to appoint elders, and he continues in v. 7 saying, ‘Since an overseer . . .’ The two words are synonymous.

The requirements for an elder are listed in 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and in Titus 1:7–9. From these some of his responsibilities can be seen. He needs to take care of the church (1 Timothy 3:5), and perhaps this has an overtone of ‘ruling’. He needs to be doctrinally sound so that he may ‘encourage others by sound doctrine’ and also ‘refute those who oppose it’ (Titus 1:9). Those who take care of (rule) the church well deserve a ‘double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching’ (1 Timothy 5:17). It seems most likely that this ‘double honour’ refers to a full financial remuneration for those elders who work full time for the church. The elders of the church also need to pray for healing for the sick (James 5:14).

It was Paul’s custom to appoint elders in every church which was planted (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Whenever elders or overseers are mentioned in the New Testament, they are always in the plural. Elders (‘bishops’) did not exercise authority over several churches. Rather, each church had a number of elders. They were the joint leaders of the local church, and exercised a spiritual ministry among the members. Peter exhorts the elders to be shepherds of God’s flock (1 Peter 5:1–4), showing that the function of the elder is pastoral.

The office of elder is not just an idea of Paul’s. Peter and James also speak as if churches will by nature have elders over them. Every church today needs leaders. There is a need for those who will take care of the church, exercise authority, give

instruction in sound doctrine, show pastoral care, preach and teach. All the verses mentioned here about elders speak of activities which are still of vital concern. Therefore, whatever we call them, we do still need elders in every church who will perform these functions.

The point for us to note is that in the New Testament bishops did not exercise control over a number of churches (with archbishops over the bishops). Rather, bishops were elders with a pastoral ministry in the local church.

Local but not isolated

The picture so far emerging in this chapter has been weighted towards individual, autonomous churches. In the New Testament there was also interchange and fellowship between churches.

For one thing, there were visiting speakers which went from one local church to another. Paul urged Apollos to visit the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:12). Paul was sending to Corinth ‘the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel’ (2 Corinthians 8:18), whoever that might be. Paul longed to visit Rome, a church he had not planted, in order to preach the gospel there and reap a harvest (Romans 1:9–13). John gives warnings about visiting speakers who are adrift in their doctrine: such people are not to be received or even welcomed (2 John 9–11).

There were greetings passed between members of different churches (Romans 16; Colossians 4:14–15) and even between churches (1 Corinthians 16:19–20). Various individuals travelled from one church to another, and were mentioned as those deserving a welcome (Romans 16:1–2; Colossians 4:10). These things indicate the warmth of fellowship which existed between churches and between believers in New Testament times.

The greatest example of concern and fellowship is shown by the way in which Gentile churches came to the aid of churches in Judea when their members were in need. This first came about by prophecy in Antioch (Acts 11:27–30), and was the cause of the most detailed passage on giving within the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9.

We might expect that independent churches would result in endless divisions. In fact, the opposite was true. Because the churches had fellowship and showed love for one another, there was unity between them which was visible to all around.

Gifts and ministries

It has already been mentioned that the church universal is likened to a building, with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). The local church is described as supplied with gifts from Christ, apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers (Ephesians 4:11). The function of these ministries is so that the church may be built up, and also ‘to prepare God’s people for works of service’ (v. 12). So we can expect the true New Testament

church to be supplied with a number of people who have spiritual gifting from God to function in this way.

We have a glimpse of this at the beginning of Acts 13; in the Antioch church there were a number of prophets and teachers, who met together to worship the Lord and fast (v. 2). Perhaps this was a meeting not of the whole church but of some of the leaders, but it shows that there were a number of them and they were characterised by spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are described in 1 Corinthians 12. They are the *charismata*, from which we derive the word ‘charismatic’. These are all gifts distributed among the members of the church, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (v. 7). It is apparent from 1 Corinthians 14 that the ‘common good’ which is intended is that ‘the church may be edified’ (v. 5) when these gifts are exercised in church meetings. If God distributes among his people a multiplicity of gifts and ministries for the good of all and the building up of the church, then it is surely the case that these gifts should be allowed full expression in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:26 comes nearest to showing us what it was like when the early church met together. Paul says, ‘When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation’. We cannot be sure whether Paul is telling them what should happen, or whether he is describing what does happen. Either way, though he lays down principles to regulate such meetings, and stipulates that ‘everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way’ (v. 40), in no way does he indicate that he rejects meetings taking such a form.

It appears, then, that the form of at least one New Testament church was such that a large number of people (all the believers?) could take part in the meetings.

In the New Testament the priesthood of all believers is evident. Christ has ‘made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father’ (Revelation 1:6). We are ‘a kingdom and priests to serve our God’ (Revelation 5:10), ‘a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God’ (1 Peter 2:9).

In the New Testament all members were encouraged to exercise the gifts with which God had endowed them. In fact, we can see how the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers operated ‘to prepare God’s people for works of service’ (Ephesians 4:12). In facilitating the ministries they were developing new apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. The ground was being laid for the multiplication of the church. The church is like a body, with Christ as head, which ‘grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work’ (Ephesians 4:16).

Meeting places

If we were able to attend one of the church meetings in those early days, we would no doubt be impressed by the simplicity of everything.

There were no church buildings. Instead, meetings took place in houses; the church in their/her/your house is the common phrase (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2).

It is important to point out that these were churches in homes. They were not housegroups (of a central church) or cells (under centralised control). They were churches in their own right.

Acts 20:7-12 gives an interesting insight into the church meeting together. They had a visiting speaker (Paul), they met together to break bread (the Lord's supper), they continued from evening until midnight (perhaps because some of the believers were slaves and could not get away earlier), and they met in the upper room of a house.

It is true that Paul discussed in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), but this seems to have been an evangelistic discussion group rather than a church, and took place every day.

Many churches nowadays seem to be based on the model of a lecture, or of a ceremonial rite. A meeting in a home may be more informal, more like a family gathering. It is perhaps not insignificant that in Luke 15, when the prodigal son returns home, he is met with a family party, complete with singing, dancing and joyful celebration. You can do that sort of thing in a home!

Lessons

I am not trying to persuade you that we must all revert to the form of churches which existed in New Testament times. What I want to emphasise is that we must ensure that the form of our modern churches must not inhibit scriptural functions. Let us examine the key aspects of the New Testament church against which we need to measure our own.

Relationships

Meeting in a home meant that churches were of necessity limited in size. When you have a small group, everyone knows everyone else. Love, fellowship and encouragement are worked out in practice. You can get to know each member and their needs, and can pray for each other and bear one another's burdens.

Responsibility

In a small group you cannot shirk your responsibilities and hide behind other people. God dispersed his gifts among the members of the church, and each one was encouraged to play his or her part and to grow in the gifts which God has given. You could not necessarily leave the work of evangelism to a minister or missionary. Because there were not many members, the contribution of each one was vital. Each church was autonomous, so although encouragement, teaching and advice were available from mature visiting believers, the church was responsible for its own life and conduct, looking to God for his direction and help.

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Because all the members were involved and accepted responsibility, the message was spread to unbelievers rapidly. The overheads in planting a new church were few. This contrasts with many Christian groups today, when planting a new church may involve great expense in training up a minister and erecting a building. Starting a new church in a home cost very little in terms of finance. Involving all the members and developing their gifts meant that leaders for these new churches were constantly being multiplied. It appears that not only was there an increase in the number of people who believed, the churches themselves 'grew daily in numbers' (Acts 16:5). These were churches which planted churches which planted churches.

Just as we tend to judge a church primarily by its form, so we tend to cling on to the forms which we know and love. We need to evaluate how our churches function in the light of how New Testament churches functioned. Above all, we need to see clearly through the fog of our traditions to discern what the scriptures indicate are the most important aspects of church life. How does your church compare with those in New Testament times?