

Church structure—Offices and Tasks

In this treatise we will outline our understanding of “offices” and tasks in the church. After touching on some basic principles belonging to this topic we will briefly describe the church structure as it was in the time of the New Testament and compare it with the situation in today’s institutional churches. Finally we will present the reasons why we do not have one pastor and explain why we chose to return to the church structure of the New Testament communities.

All Christians are brothers and sisters

Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He has a direct and living relationship with every Christian without any other mediator.

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

All Christians are brothers and sisters and together they take care of the church - each one according to the gifts he has received.

But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honour to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:24-25)

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (Matthew 23:8-12)

There are differences among Christians in experience, knowledge of the Bible, and obedience to God. We should be aware of these differences but we should never consider them fundamental differences. We cannot divide Christians into two groups - those who have been enabled to reveal God’s will and those who follow (i.e. clergy and laymen, those who have and have not been baptised with the Holy Spirit, etc.). At the end of this article we will explain some passages that are often misused in this context.

The structure of the church in New Testament times

Elders

In the Acts of the Apostles we read of various examples where the Apostles appointed elders:

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

The elders (Greek: elder = presbyteros) **are also the overseers** (Greek: overseer = episkopos) **and shepherds** (Greek: poimenes) **of the church.**

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. (Acts 20:17)

... and in the same context we read about the same people:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:28)

The way these terms are used interchangeably reveals that they do not describe different levels of hierarchy. They simply describe different aspects of the same function. In some translations the word 'overseer' (episkopos) is rendered 'bishop'. In the Bible 'episkopos' just means an elder and is a far cry from the so-called 'bishops' of today. Actually, it was only in the second century that a single person became the leader of a community in one town, unlike in the time of the Apostles when communities were not led by one person but by a collective of elders.

Elders are addressed in plural in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Peter 5:1-5.

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons. (Philippians 1:1)

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as {your} fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ... (1 Peter 5:1-5)

In Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 several elders were appointed.

This structure was a certain kind of protection against false teachings. If one of the elders went astray then he would be reprovved by the others.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, ... from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:28,30)

It was also a protection against the danger of a single person gaining an exalted position, which is criticised in 3 John 9:

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.

The collective leading of the Christian community, as illustrated above, does not mean that the elders decide everything. In Matthew 18:15-18 Jesus shows that the most important decisions should be carried by the whole church.

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen {to you,} take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:15-18)

Every Christian bears responsibility for the teaching and the decisions of the church, which is Christ's body. An elder should not replace the function of the body but he should care for its well-being.

Deacons

Philippians 1:1 mentions deacons. The Greek word means a 'servant', 'helper' or 'minister'. Related

expressions are found in Acts 6:1-6.

... their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving {of food.} (Acts 6:1 literally: “daily service” Greek: diakonia)

... It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. (Acts 6:2 “to serve” Greek: diakonein)

The issue here is the distribution of food among the needy Christians. The Apostles appointed seven disciples who took this service on. They are not called deacons in this passage but most probably the word ‘deacon’ used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 is also connected with the service of organising and distributing material things.

The post-apostolic structure of the church

After the death of the apostles Peter and Paul the situation did not essentially change. We can see this from a letter, which the Christian community in Rome wrote to the Christian community in Corinth around the year A.D. 70. This letter is known as the First Letter of Clement. It does not form part of the New Testament and we quote it here only as a historical document. The main concern of this letter is the proper respect due to elders. We read there:

For our sin will not be small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties. Blessed are those presbyters who, having finished their course before now, have obtained a fruitful and perfect departure [from this world]; for they have no fear lest any one deprive them of the place now appointed them. But we see that you have removed some men of excellent behaviour from the ministry, which they fulfilled blamelessly and with honour. (1 Clement 44)

We read about presbyters (elders) who fulfil the task of episcopate (the task of an overseer). The terms ‘episkopos’ (overseer) and ‘presbyteros’ (elder) are once again used synonymously in this letter, while we read nothing about a single leader. We can see here that the New Testament church structure as described above did not change even after the death of the apostles. The apostles did not appoint single leaders over the local churches even when they left this world behind. So when the apostle Paul finally left the Ephesian church, though he was aware that some Christians were in danger of falling away, he merely said:

I commend you to God and to the word of his grace. (Acts 20:32)

By the beginning of the second century, though, we already find a single leader in a number of local Christian communities. They were called “episkopoi” (overseers) which was originally a synonym for elders. We read about them in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c.35 – c.110) without any reference to their special appointment by the apostles (The Roman Catholic and Orthodox organisations claim that “priests” have to be appointed by the successors of the apostles, i.e. the bishops = Apostolic succession). Emphasising the role of a single person in this way is completely alien to the New Testament. Ignatius wrote:

Let no man do anything of what belongs to the church separately from the bishop. (Smyrna 8:1)

This development continued so that by the end of the second century Ireneus from Lyon considered the episkopoi to be the successors of the apostles.

Roman Catholic church structure

In the documents of the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council (1965) we read:

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (Dei verbum 10)

What this practically means is that one needs a special 'key' to 'unlock' the Bible. According to the Roman Catholic Church, priests as representatives of the bishop hold the key to unlock the true meaning of scripture.

The apostle John, on the other hand, wrote in his first letter to all Christians:

I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him. (1 John 2:26-27)

The key for understanding the Holy Scriptures is the Holy Spirit who dwells in all Christians. This is the anointing John refers to.

In the Roman Catholic Church the authority of the bishops is often compared with that of the apostles. We regard the authority of the apostles as unique due to their personal experience with Jesus and the role they played in laying the foundations of the church.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:19-20)

The apostle Paul also connects his apostleship with having seen Jesus:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1)

The usual church structure in Protestant and Free Churches

Most Protestants and free churches reject the Roman Catholic doctrine about the teaching office of bishops. At the same time they usually see the necessity of appointing one pastor over the elders. The pastor takes the task of preaching in the church and has the last word in important decisions. One argument often given in support of this is the example of Timothy and Titus, the co-workers of Paul, who had significant authority in Ephesus and Crete (1 Timothy 1:3, Titus 1:5). This reasoning disregards the fact that these co-workers were left in these places to finish the work of the apostle. They did not remain there indefinitely and no position or office was established to continue their role after their departure.

Jerome, one of the church fathers from the fourth century, did not consider this widespread form of

church government to have been given by the Lord but to have been a later development within the church. He wrote:

... Before splits appeared in [our] religion through the stimulation of the devil, and before it was spoken among the people: 'I belong to Paul, I to Apollos, and I to Cephas himself', the churches had been governed jointly by councils of presbyters. As soon as each of them started considering those he baptised his own, and not Christ's, it was decided all over the world that one man chosen from among presbyters [in each community - translator's remark] should be set over the rest to take care of the whole church. In this way the seeds of schism were done away with. ... For that reason bishops should consider that they were placed over presbyters due to a custom rather than by a command of the Lord; and that one ought to rule the church jointly, imitating Moses who, though he might have stayed alone in the lead of Israel, chose seventy men with whom he judged the people together. (Jerome, Commentarius in epistulam Pauli ad Titum 1:5)

But implementing a man-made 'custom' is not a real spiritual solution for the problem.

Conclusion

1. No man is infallible. Every one may need correction. Every Christian should grow in bearing responsibility. We do not see it as God's leading to appoint one leader over the church or a local Christian community.
2. A church needs elders who watch over the right teaching and life. Their authority should not be based on a university degree but on Christian virtues, experience, and the ability to teach. In the church there are elders who were not officially appointed by somebody else or by the previous elders. A formal appointment of elders ought to help make it clear who can bear this task. In our circumstances we did not see the necessity to do so since our community has grown step by step and we know each other well. We also know our elders. This does not change their task and everything we have said concerning elders can be applied to them. They take part in our lives and we take part in theirs. They earn their own money in normal jobs, as do the others. They, too, need encouragement and admonition, as do the others. They, too, confess their sins to any of the other Christians. The elders are not the only ones who teach.
3. We should not come together to be fed a programme but to share. It is not difficult to take part in meetings where somebody puts on a programme. This way, however, does not teach a person to take on responsibility. If Christians do not learn to bear responsibility for the church a development towards a wrong structure is unavoidable. Loving others means taking responsibility for them. The Apostle Paul encourages us to do this:

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. (Romans 15:14)

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

In doing this we can build unity which is not imposed from above but which comes from our hearts. Such unity can also be a testimony for the world.

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. (1 Corinthians 14:24-25)

We learn to bear this responsibility every day, preserving the humility that makes us able to listen to the others – to our elders, but also to our younger spiritual brothers and sisters. (1 Peter 5:5)

Passages that are often misused in this context

There are two passages in which we find the word ‘overseer’ (episkopos) written in singular. These passages are: 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7. In Titus 1:5 we can see that a plurality of elders in the church is presupposed. So the word ‘overseer’ is used in singular because these passages describe the qualities required of an overseer. It does not express that there should be one overseer.

© 2011 www.christians.eu - All rights reserved.

The content of this article may only be republished or reprinted in an unchanged, complete form for private use. Content may not be reproduced in any other form without written permission from **www.christians.eu**

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations taken from the NASB.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Last modified: 22nd December 2011