

# Some Assembly Required

Texts: Hebrews 10:25/ 12:18-24

## I. In search of “the Church”

- A. The longing of the Christian heart for fellowship (1 John 3:14)
- B. God’s provision in the Church
  - 1. God’s Family (security and acceptance)
  - 2. God’s Temple (worship)
  - 3. Christ’s Body (service)
- C. Which church? The universal and the particular
  - 1. the claims of the Catholic Church
  - 2. Cults
  - 3. Denominations
- D. Disappointment with the church (Prov.25:14/13:12)
- E. The desperation of the displaced remnant (1 Cor.11:19/Mal.3:16-18)

## II. What is right about the church?

- A. Jesus is there (Matt.18:20)
- B. Potent prayer (Matt. 18:19)
- C. Worship (Psalm 22:22)
- D. Prophetic voice (Amos 3:7)
- E. Mutual nurture (Heb.10:24)

## III. The primitive apostolic assemblies

- A. How often did they gather? (Acts 2:46/5:42) [Not weekly—Acts 20:7/1 Cor.16:2]
- B. Where did they gather? (Acts 2:46/5:42/12:12) [No church buildings]
- C. What did they do? (Acts 2:42) [No entertainment; no evangelism]
- D. How were finances done? (Acts 2:44-45/4:32-25/6:1) [No tithing; No “501C-3”]
- E. How was church growth accomplished? (Mark 16:20/ Acts 2:43/4:33) [No gimmicks]
- F. What was the result? (2:47/4:33)

## IV. How to Create a Monster (Frankenchurch)

- A. How the church became institutionalized: or, “How to embalm a move of God”
  - Ignatius (110)
  - Irenaeus (end of 2nd century) taught apostolic succession and supremacy of Roman church

- Cyprian (middle of 3rd century) taught
  - no salvation outside the church, which is ruled by bishops through apostolic succession
  - Peter's association with Rome gives it preeminence
  - leaders have priestly functions
- Augustine of Hippo (late 4th century) taught:
  - church is not a spiritual communion of believers, but the visible, ecclesiastical organization of Catholicism, outside of which none could be saved, regardless of personal faith or holiness
  - authority of tradition alongside Scripture

1. Simple spiritual brotherhood replaced by a religio-political machine
  - a. Elders who taught and set an example replaced by bishop to whom submission was mandatory
  - b. obedience and love replaced by confession of the creed as condition of fellowship (Tit.1:16/1 Cor.4:19f/Jas 2:19f)
2. Spiritual experience replaced by symbolism (sacramentalism & sacerdotalism)
3. Spiritual leaders replaced by professional clergy (priesthood)
  - a. seminary training (Matt.10:25/1 John 2:27)
  - b. prestige (Matt.23:1-12/3 John 9)
  - c. salaries (Matt.10:8-10)
  - d. career climbing (Matt.20:25-28)
4. Church meetings became centralized in sacred buildings (Acts 7:48-50)
5. Overhead costs put financial pressure on members (Finances were needed for clergy salaries and building maintenance)
6. The Church sought and received sponsorship from secular state (2 Cor.6:14-18/1 Cor.6:1/Rev.13:11-12/17:3)
7. After the Reformation, church gatherings became evangelistic meetings

## B. Return from Babylon

1. Unsuccessful attempts of the past
  - a. Before the Reformation
  - b. The Reformation
  - c. The Anabaptists, Quakers
  - d. Evangelical denominationalism
  - e. Small groups and home churches
2. Removing the rubble (Jer.1.:9-10/Zech.4:6)
  - a. Renewing of the mind (Rom.12:2)

- I. Church isn't something you go to. Church is the community of the called-out ones, whose corporate life together comprises an alternative, pilgrim society alongside that of the dominant culture.
- II. Church gatherings are not necessarily formal liturgical protocols where Christians go to meet a God with whom they have less contact in the time between meetings. They are family love feasts where the saints meet with their fellow pilgrims to express their common adoration of Christ and where they minister to one another according to their particular gifts (Acts 2:42/1 Cor.11:21/14:26/Jude 12).
  - A. As far as we know, Jesus never met together with His disciples for a formal religious service (apart from their regular attendance of the Sabbath service at the Jewish synagogue).
  - B. There are no sacred buildings, holy places or holy days which command our special reverence. All days and all places are equally sacred to those whose life is lived in God (John 4:21-24/Acts 7:48-50/Rom.14:5-6/Gal.4:9-11)
  - C. The idea of wearing special, formal clothing on the part either of the clergy or of the attendees is contrary to the Spirit of the New Covenant, and is spoken against by Christ and the apostles (Matt.23:5/Luke 20:46/1 Tim.2:9-10)
  - D. What about "the sacraments"?

b. Eliminate the politics

- I. Leaders do not have dominion, and should not act as if they did (Matt.20:25-28/1 Pet.5:2-3/2 Cor.1:24/1 Cor.11:3)
- II. Individual assemblies don't "own" the "members of Christ" ("membership") 1 Cor.1:10ff
  - A. All believers are part of one flock (John 10:16) and owe their submission only to their Shepherd (John 10:2-5/1 Cor.11:3)
  - B. loyalty to teachers and organizations exclude the participants from outside fellowship (Gal.4:17/3 John 9f)
  - C. The idea of covenantal relationships and "spiritual covering" associated with local church commitment has no biblical basis (Isa.30:1 KJV).
  - D. "Tithing" to the local church?
- III. Objections:
  - A. What about the scriptural admonitions to submit to the leaders? (Heb.13:7, 17/Rom.12:8/1 Thess.5:12/1 Tim.5:17)
  - B. What about church discipline?
  - C. Where does accountability come in?
  - D. How can the leaders of an assembly know who is "on their team"?

E. How can the leadership's "vision" be fulfilled?

c. Eliminate the legalism

- I. flexibility of structure: new wineskins for new wine (Matt.9:17)
- II. permit others to follow Jesus outside your structure (Luke 9:49f)

d. Practice the unity of the Spirit (1 Cor.1:10-13)

- I. accept whoever God accepts (Acts 10:15/Rom.15:7)
- II. No "creed" but Scripture (Mark 7:7-9)
- III. Liberty of conscience where Scripture is not clear or gives no explicit command (2 Cor.3:17/Rom.14:1-6)

# Who Will Lead Us?

## **I. Who provided leadership for the early congregations?**

- A. Variously called elders, overseers (bishops), and shepherds (pastors)
- B. Plurality

## **II. What did the shepherding functions of the elders involve?**

- A. Teaching the Word of God (1 Tim.3:2/Tit.1:9/Heb.13:7)
- B. Encouragement and warning (1 Thess.5:14-15)
- C. Set example for the rest (1 Pet.5:3)

## **III. Was their leadership “political” (institutional) in nature?**

- A. Institutional authority defined:
  - 1. Institutional authority inheres in the office, not the character or the correctness of the officeholder (3 John 9-12)
  - 2. Institutional authority requires submission to the will of the officeholder (Matt.20:25-28/1 Pet.5:3)
  - 3. Institutional authority involves some form of succession to office (none given in scripture—2 Tim.2:2)
  - 4. Contrast Judges with Kings (Judges 8:22-23/ 1 Sam.8)
- B. “Elder” not so much an office as a description (cf. 1 Tim.5:1/2 John 1/1 Pet.5:1, 5)
  - 1. “Qualifications” not related to special training or grooming for office, but simply those things that are an example to all believers (1 Tim.3:1-7/Tit.1:5-9).
  - 2. Once the qualifications are read, everyone ought to know who is and who aint. The adding of a label does not generally add anything worth having (Matt.23:6-10).
- C. But what about those “submit” verses?
  - 1. “Submit” and “obey” (1 Pet.5:5/Heb.13:17)
  - 2. “Proistemi” (Rom.12:8/1 Tim.3:4, 12; 5:17/1 Thess.5:12)
  - 3. “Hegeomai” (Heb.13:7, 17, 24)

## **IV. Appointment of elders**

- A. What does “ordain” mean?
  - kathistemi* “to appoint a person to a position...not a formal ecclesiastical ordination...but ‘appointment’ for the recognition of the churches of those who had already been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit...” (VINE)
- B. When should elders be appointed (1 Tim.5:22)?
  - 1. When needed (Acts 6/ Tit.1)
    - (Does possessing the Bible change anything in this respect?)
  - 2. When available (Jer.5:1/ 1 Cor.6:5)
- C. How are they appointed, and for how long ?

## **V. Reasons not to lay hands hastily on leaders**

- A. Appointment doesn’t create leaders, it only gives them formal recognition
- B. Real leaders will do the work of leading, and the real sheep will recognize them, with or without a label

- C. The apostles seemed to have a policy of appointing leaders when required to by circumstances (Acts 6)
- D. Although the apostles appointed elders (perhaps because the sheep had no Bibles, or there was confusion over who was really qualified to lead), valid assemblies had functioning leaders, even without formal appointment (Acts 13:1/14:23 /1 Cor.16:15-16/1 Thess.5:12f/3 John 9-12).
- E. Leaders' attitudes often change when given political offices
- F. Even if the leader doesn't change, people's view of him will
- G. Appointment of elders centralizes the work of ministry to a few
- H. When there is an office of leadership, it gives the ambitious something for which to aspire without possessing authentic spiritual leadership from God.
- I. The presence of elders does not guarantee the safety of the flock from wolves (Acts 20:29-30), and a wolf is much more difficult to deal with if he occupies the office of an elder.

## ***Quotes from Antiquity***

Gaius Pliny, Governor in Asia Minor, in a letter to Emperor Trajan, describing his findings after interrogating Christians, 112 AD:

“They continued to maintain that the sum of their guilt or error lay in this, that it was their custom to meet on a fixed day before daylight and, to sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as to a god. They also bound themselves mutually by an oath, not in order to commit any crime, but to promise not to commit theft, robbery, or adultery; not to break their word; and not to deny entrusted goods when claimed. After doing this, it was their custom to part from one another and then to meet again to share an ordinary and harmless meal.”

—*Letters, X.96-97*

Justin Martyr, approx. 138 AD:

“On the day named after the sun, we hold a meeting in one place for all who live in the cities or the country nearby. The Memoirs of the Apostles or the Writings of the Prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the overseer gives a talk urging and inviting us to imitate all these good examples. Then we all stand up together and send up our prayers. As said before, bread is brought and wine and water after we have finished our prayer. The overseer likewise sends up prayers and thanksgivings with all his might. The people give their consent by saying “Amen.” Now the distribution takes place, and each one receives what has been accepted with thanksgiving. Those who are absent receive their share through the table servants [deacons].

“Those who are well-off and freewillingly wish to do so contribute as much as each one wants to. What is collected is deposited with the overseer. He uses it for the care of orphans and widows, for those who are suffering lack arising from illness or any other cause, for prisoners, and for travelers staying with us for a short time. Briefly, he provides for all who are in need in the town.”

—*First Apology 65-67*

Justin’s trial, in either 163 or 167 AD:

City Prefect Rusticus asked, “Where do you assemble?”

Justin answered, “Where each one wants to and is able to. You probably believe that we all come together in one and the same place. This is not so, for the God of the Christians is not limited to any one place. He fills heaven and earth. He is honored and glorified by the faithful everywhere.”

City Prefect Rusticus said, “Answer, where do you assemble, or in what place do you gather your followers?”

Justin answered, “I live up on the hill, close to the baths of Timothy; during all this time (and I am now living in Rome for a second time) I have not known any other meeting place. I communicated the teachings of truth to anyone who wished to see me there.”

—*the Acts of Rome*, apparently taken from court transcripts

Hippolytus, between 200-235 AD:

“Let one who has been chosen by all the people be ordained as overseer. When he has been nominated and has pleased all, the whole people, with the elders and the overseers present, shall assemble on the Lord’s Day. With the agreement of all, they shall lay their hands upon him...”

—*The Apostolic Tradition*, chapters 2, 4, 8-15

Think of how far removed is the present mentality concerning the “professional ministry” from that of Christ and the Apostles! The notion that special “higher” education plays any positive role in qualifying a man to teach or preach, for example, is a concept totally foreign to anything the New Testament would countenance. The New Testament church was instructed that “Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth.” The Bible places no premium upon ignorance, of course, That an advanced degree tells you nothing about the qualifications of a man to preach is easily seen, first, by consideration of the many effective (“gifted”) ministers who never had formal academic training. This list would include Christ and the apostles, and, so far as we can ascertain, all of the elders/pastors of the apostolic age. In later history, the list would of necessity include

the likes of C.H. Spurgeon, D. L. Moody, and A.W. Tozer. A second line of proof is provided by the reading what many men with impeccable academic credentials have written, often demonstrating that their “book larnin” has apparently contributed nothing either to their spiritual discernment, nor, in many cases, even their ability to distinguish between a rational and an irrational argument. No one familiar with the facts would deny that many brilliant and spiritual men have acquired academic degrees and have thus acquired status in the eyes of the academic community. But who would venture to argue that the same men would not have proven to be equally brilliant and spiritual had they been deprived of the opportunity to obtain formal training?