



Lesson 5: Structure of the Church Membership, Leadership, and Governance

August 13, 2017

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Have you ever wondered why we set the church up the way we do? Why do some churches have elders, and others have pastors, and others have bishops? Why do we ask people to join our church? Why do we have business meetings and not just let the deacons and the pastors run the show? And is any of this based on Scripture?

In our first two lessons, we defined a church as ***a group of saved, baptized believers that gather regularly to evangelize the lost, build one another up, and worship God.*** We then saw several pictures of what a church looks like. Today we will be examining

Membership

Does God expect Christians to become members of a local church? Some argue that it is not necessary or even desirable to join a church as a member. What does the Bible say about membership?

1. The Bible never states whether there was a formal roll of membership in the New Testament. But...
 - The word “church” (ekklesia) was used of democratic assemblies in Greek and Roman times that did have such rolls
 - There was a clear understanding of who was a part of the community and who wasn’t (Acts 6:3)
 - There were official rolls of widows who could receive help in the early church (1 Timothy 5:9)

2. The Bible is clear that that there are many responsibilities a Christian has in regard to their church, responsibilities that can only be fulfilled as a member.
 - Participation in the ministry/life of a local church (1 Cor 12)
 - Many churches restrict some or all of the ministries a Christian can be involved in until they join the church.
 - This can be important from a legal standpoint, and also assures them that they have heard a solid testimony of salvation and that the person has been baptized
 - Submission to the authority of a local church
 - This submission is both to the leaders of a church (Hebrews 13:17) and the members themselves (Ephesians 5:21; Matthew 18:17).
 - Governing the local church (Acts 6)
 - We will discuss this later in the lesson, but this is important because many churches require membership before one can vote.

While Scripture nowhere says “become a member at a local church” to fulfill the New Testament commands for participating in the life and ministry of a church one would have a hard time making arguing that church membership is not required.

Leadership

The New Testament gives us two distinct positions in ministry. Although there were various support roles (a “treasurer” in 1 Corinthians 16: or an apostolic delegate such as Timothy in Ephesus), only 2 positions are described in detail and there are only 2 positions we are given qualifications for: pastor and deacons (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13, cf Titus 1:7-9).

Pastors

There are 3 terms used for the primary spiritual leaders of a church, each with a slightly different shade of meaning. While certain titles are associated with certain traditions (for example, **elder** is often

used by those who have a *Presbyterian model* of governance and think *multiple elders* should rule equally; **pastor** by those think there should be a *head pastor* and hold to more *congregational rule*), all terms are biblical and helpful.

1. Elder – emphasizes the maturity and dignity of the office. The word at times refers to those who are literally older (1 Timothy 5:1), but can be used for the spiritual leader of a church. Although an elder cannot be a young Christian (1 Timothy 3:6), there is no age requirement (1 Timothy 4:12).
2. Bishop (Overseer) – emphasizes the administrative aspect of the pastor’s job. This was a term that referred to someone watching over the care and execution of something. In Christianity, it was the study and obedience to the word the pastor is to oversee.¹
3. Pastor – related to the word “shepherd.” The shepherd role involved both feeding the sheep (John 21) and protecting them (Acts 20:28-31).

All three of these terms describe different aspects of the same role (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-2). A pastor/elder/bishop is a spiritually mature administrator who cares for and defends God’s people. As we saw earlier, there is no priesthood in the church, for the church is a priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).

Deacons

Deacons are called upon to assist the pastor in the practical duties of caring for the church. They function in a service, not a ruling capacity and are chosen by the church for this role. (Acts 6)

However, deacons can and ought to have additional leadership and teaching responsibilities, especially when they are equipped for it. Acts 6:5-6 tells the list of the first deacons, and in chapters 7 and 8

¹ “ἐπίσκοπος” in BDAG, 379.

Stephen and Philip, two of the newly elected deacons, would begin preaching ministries that would bring great fruit. Deacons need not be teachers to be a deacon (unlike pastors, cf 1 Timothy 3:2), but they can move into that role if they are so equipped.

Governance²

Episcopal Model

The model used by Catholics, Anglicans, and some Methodists. In this model, a bishop oversees a group of churches and ordains bishops. The Catholic church is the most famous example of this, with the ultimate authority resting in the bishop of Rome, the pope. No such structure is seen in the New Testament.

Presbyterian Model

The authority rests in the elders, often elected by the congregation. The elders of a church share equal authority in a *session*. Above the session is the presbyter, above the presbyter is the synod, above the synod is the general assembly. Evidence for this model is drawn from the frequent mention of elders in the New Testament.

Congregational Model

The authority rests in the congregation. The pastors provide leadership, but ultimate authority rests in the congregation for electing new leaders and conducting business. Evidence for this model is seen in the New Testament when local congregations. . .

- Elect deacons (Acts 6:3)
- Elect elders? (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5)³
- Send delegates (Acts 11:22)
- Decide on doctrine (Acts 15:22)
- Discipline believers (Acts 5:4-5; Matthew 18:15-17)

² Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 369-371.

³ These verses could refer to selection by one or congregation. Since early Christian records show congregational vote, like the selection of deacons, vote by congregation is likely the normal practice of the NT church.