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The Structure & Organization Of The Church

Christ stated he would build his church (**Matt 16.18**) which occurred on the day of Pentecost when the remission of sins in the name of Jesus was preached (**Acts 2**) for the first time. We know the early Christians continued in the apostles doctrine (**Acts 2.42**) which they received through the guidance of the Holy Spirit as Christ promised them (**John 14, 15, 16**). As the church grew and expanded there were others who had spiritual gifts, imparted by the laying on of the apostles hands and prayer, who filled these roles. When this was done we see that there were a variety of functions that were needed and filled. The apostle Paul describes this for us. “**And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...**” (**Eph 4.11**). This is part of a conversation in which Paul is describing the gifts of the Holy Spirit that existed at that time. The reason for these gifts was simple. The scriptures hadn’t been written yet and so it was necessary that the guide, the Holy Spirit, was sent to aid until such time as the word had been verified and completed (**1 Cor 13.9-10, Heb 2.3-4**). When that work was done the miraculous nature of the gifts would pass.

Today we see many religious bodies composed of a variety of offices at a local, regional, national and global level. Within these bodies there is a hierarchy that defines the rank and file of authority and leadership. Conferences, congresses, synods and other mechanisms are used to define doctrine and practice within these organizations with occasional changes in doctrine and therefore practice as a result. As we continue toward a discussion of benevolence and the role of the church we must understand the structure of the Lord’s church and how it is governed. This is crucial to an understanding of what limits are in place and how the work of the church is carried out.

There is a misunderstanding in the religious world concerning some of the things we read in the book of Acts. Some bodies attempt to emulate the events of Pentecost and use it as proof of things such as spiritual gifts and the credibility of conventions and conferences to determine doctrine. Let’s take a look at the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the church within the context of the scriptures and then explore the reasons for this.

Miraculous Beginning

Many folks have the concept that miracles in the scriptures were commonplace and happened all the time. When we examine the text we see that miracles took place during specific periods and for definite reasons. There are three “beginnings” if you will that have a miraculous start. Creation is the first of these. God created everything out of nothing by speaking it into existence. The birth of the Israelite nation was done miraculously with the plagues in Egypt, the Lord’s appearance at Sinai and events during the time of Moses and Joshua. The beginning of the church is the third great event that was marked by miracles.

On the day of Pentecost in **Acts 2** the Holy Spirit fell on the twelve as they were gathered together. This was signified as the appearance of flame appeared over them and they were able to speak in tongues. Those tongues were



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not the speech we hear today by those who claim to have this gift but were the languages of those assembled in Jerusalem. There are a number of nations represented as Jews had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and they each heard the apostles in their own language (Acts 2.6). The apostles had been promised this power by Christ in **John 16.7-14**. The Holy Spirit would guide them by revealing the truth to them. The apostles, and only the apostles (Acts 8.18-20), were able to impart these gifts. We can see an example of this earlier in Acts 8 as Peter and John came to Samaria after Philip had preached to them. Luke tells us, “*Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.*” (Acts 8.14-17). As we continue through the New Testament we see that the miraculous gifts were intended to bring the body together as Paul states, “*Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ...*” (Eph 4.13). Simply stated the miraculous gifts were to establish the credibility of what was being taught and prove the word was from God. The writer of Hebrews states, “*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?*” (Heb 2.3-4). We are told later however that there would be a time when these would end. Paul states, “*For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.*” (1 Cor 13.9-10). As Paul states, the work of the Holy Spirit was not the final guide. The aim of the Holy Spirit was to reveal the word and when that word was completed the need for guidance would come to an end. Although some believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit made the recipients perfect we can dispel that notion by reading 1 Corinthians chapters twelve through fourteen. In spite of the guidance of the Holy Spirit there were still times when the apostles had to understand what was meant. For that reason there were meetings called to discuss this.

Gathering & Determination Of Doctrine

Based on events that occurred in the book of Acts, religious bodies today convene a number of bodies to discuss and determine doctrine and practice. This is loosely based on examples from the books of Acts in which there were gatherings held to determine what should be taught and done. As I stated above, the Holy Spirit was a guide but did not always reveal the exact meaning of some things allowing the apostles to come to an understanding on their own of what was intended. Let’s take a look at why this was done and how it came about. Later we’ll apply this to the current organization and structure of the church which hasn’t changed.

First of all the apostles were to reveal doctrine. Christ told them in John chapters fourteen through sixteen that the comforter or Holy Spirit would come and perform specific functions. The Spirit would reveal all things, bring Christ’s statements to their remembrance (**John 14.26**) and reveal things to come (**John 16.13**). The Spirit would not reveal anything different than what God wished to be stated because “*he shall not speak of himself; but*



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whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak” (John 16.13). Christ also stated that there were things they were not able to bear, or understand, and this was exactly why the Holy Spirit would be sent to aid them (John 16.12).

Looking at this we can see that the early church in the beginning was slowly emerging being guided by the apostles who in turn were being guided by the Holy Spirit. In its infancy the church was not fully formed nor was the doctrine fully delivered. Christ had told the apostles that when they needed to know what to say it would be given to them (Matt 10.19) but there are other times when God expected the apostles to work and figure out what was being taught and for that reason meetings with the elders and the church were held to discuss certain events.

One of these was following the conversion of Cornelius. In Acts chapter ten Peter saw a vision in which he saw all manner of unclean animals and was commanded to kill and eat. Peter, holding to the teachings of the Law refused to eat anything *“common or unclean”* (Acts 10.14). This was repeated three times with Peter refusing to comply. Finally he was told, *“What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common”* (Acts 10.15). This was repeated three times after which Peter was told to go with the men who had come seeking him. At the home of Cornelius, Peter understood the meaning of the vision. As the awareness grew he stated, *“Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”* (Acts 10.34-35). Following the conversion of Cornelius when Peter returned to Jerusalem there was concern that he had gone to the house of a Gentile. To understand the significance of this the apostles met with the elders and brethren to discuss the event. *“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”* (Acts 11.18).

Another notable example was in the discussion of the conversion of Gentiles. As the Gospel was preached and Gentile converts added to the church there were those who taught that they could not be saved without being circumcised. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders to understand what was to be taught. As the discussion continued James stated, *“Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.”* (Acts 15.14-20). Error had been introduced. The apostles and elders met to understand what should be taught. James, drawing on the scriptures concluded what needed to be done which did not include the observation of part of the Law of Moses.

In both of these instances we find that a problem existed. In each instance there was direction directly through the vision that Peter had in Acts 10 and indirectly in James quoting of the prophecy of Amos (Amos 9.11) in Acts chapter 15. In each case the final determination was not something that reflected the opinion of the apostles.



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Both cases represent the guidance of the Holy Spirit who was assisting the apostles in understanding what God wanted taught. We have to be clear on this point. The doctrine originated with God, was revealed in a number of ways to the apostles who then passed it on and was thus recognized as the “*apostles doctrine*” (Acts 2.42). It was not their opinion. It was the **revelation of God to men** who were the primary recipients of the revelation.

There are no apostles today. The word was revealed during the first century as Peter states that we now have all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Pet 1.3). There is no ongoing revelation as indicated by Jude (Jude 3). Once the word was revealed and written down the doctrine was complete and the miraculous aspects of the work waned and disappeared (1 Cor 13.9-10). There is no longer a need for anyone to meet or convene to determine doctrine. Its done. The only meetings now that could be held would be to study together but we must observe and remember the structure and organization as we see in the scriptures.

Organization, Authority & Delegation

In its infancy there were no elders. The apostles were the beginning. As the church grew the apostles imparted gifts to others who were faithful. These gifts were to confirm the word and teach doctrine as God desired. As I’ve noted above the inspired apostles were killed or died. John is believed to be the last of the apostles living at the end of the first century. When he died there was no more laying on of the apostles hands. Tongues ceased. Miracles stopped. The revealed word was preserved in writing, copied, circulated and collected into what we have today as the New Testament. So what remained? The scriptures provide an outline of this clearly. Christ remains as the head of the church. Elders, also known as pastors or bishops, are to watch over the flock spiritually, deacons are to work with the elders in performing work needed to maintain the church. Along with these we have evangelists or preachers and teachers. Finally we have the members who worship and work under the oversight of the elders in conjunction with the deacons, evangelists and teachers. Let’s take a look at each of these as this will be important for our later discussion of benevolence.

Elders: Are to be men who meet the qualifications outlined by Paul in 1 Tim 3.1-7 and Titus 1.6-9. These are older men who are grounded in the faith and able to deal with the issues that will present themselves. They are to be mature teachers of God’s word who have proven they hold to the truth and can detect and deal with error. They will have a concern and love for the entire body and will seek to insure the members are properly taught and edified, exhorted etc. in the word.

Deacons: Are to be men who meet the qualifications outlined by Paul in 1 Tim 3.8-12. These are younger men who are grounded in the faith but perhaps lack the experience of the elders. Deacons work with the elders to care for the various needs of the church in a spiritual and physical sense.

Evangelists / preachers: These are men who proclaim God’s word faithfully. Peter states, “*If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God*” (1 Pet 4.11). James provides a warning to those who teach stating, “*My*



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brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (Jas 3.1). The word masters is translated as teacher in more modern versions. Preachers and teachers are known by what they teach which needs to be confirmed by the elders and members who do as the Bereans who *“received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17.11).*

We need to think of these offices not as a prestigious ranking but as roles in the church. No member is above any other, nor are any better than others. The level of direction and responsibility increases with the office. So now that we’ve identified the roles of members in the leadership of the church let’s put these in perspective and see how they form the structure of the body.

1. **Christ** is the **head** of the church - **Col 1.18**
2. **Elders** shepherd the flock and have responsibility in the local church only (**1 Pet 5.2**)
 - a. multiple elders are to be appointed - cannot have just one
 - b. cannot delegate or assume direction of another congregation
3. **Deacons** function under the oversight of the elders
 - a. a multiplicity is required
 - b. have responsibility only in the local congregation
4. **Evangelists / preachers / teachers**
 - a. provide teaching, exhortation, edification to build up the body (**2 Tim 4.1-5**)
 - b. work under the oversight of the elders
 - c. if there are no elders works with the members to appoint men who are qualified
 - d. works with existing elders in the appointment of new elders / deacons
 - e. to teach the truth without alteration - members & elders / deacons need to monitor / work with
5. **Members**
 - a. includes elders, deacons and preachers / teachers
 - b. includes all who do not serve in active roles
 - c. responsible for maintaining attendance, good works and support of the work
 - d. to submit to the leadership of the elders as the elders submit to Christ (**Heb 13.17**)

The Church Today

The church that follows the pattern set forth in the New Testament today will have the organization described above. Each group of the Lord’s people function autonomously under the ultimate direction of Christ and God through the scriptures. Doctrine is set and will not change. Members visiting different locations find they are united by the common faith and practice found in the New Testament. Today many religious bodies meet in a variety of venues to discuss and change policy, doctrine and practice. Changes are based on the opinions of humans, desires of the membership and social pressures from changing cultural trends. Some in the Lord’s church over the years have taken the liberty to change or reinterpret the structure and function of the church based on their opinion of what



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they think the mission and work of the church is. In the next article we'll discuss benevolence and how some brethren have altered the structure of the church to accommodate their interpretation of the churches work.

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