

The church of the Living God

(Part III)

We have been considering the church of the Living God. There is one simple statement that Jesus made concerning the church, that ought to have a profound impact on our entire outlook and expectation of the N.T. assembly;

“...upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.”
(Matthew 16:18b)

If only for this statement alone, we ought to have an invigorating interest, and intense expectation in the church of the Living God.

When we are tempted to get discouraged, when a Biblical approach to the church seems completely out of favor with the majority of those who profess to be Christians,

when we are tempted to lose confidence in the Scriptural mandate, and pattern for the N.T. assembly, when other approaches seem so much more effective;

When we begin to lose our sense of purpose, power, and focus;

This is the statement we need to be reminded of. In its' clarity, and supreme authority, it is all we should need, to be filled with all joy and peace in believing.

*** Jesus said it – I believe it – that settles it – and I must not forget it!

The authority and credibility of the Son of God is at stake. The triune God has committed Himself to the ultimate success and triumph of the N.T. church.

We have seen that the church is a local assembly of saints who have been called out from the course of this world, to be gathered together in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We have seen that God has given to us a lofty corporate calling, as those who have been purchased with the blood of His Own Son.

- to be the pillar and support of the truth
- to be making disciples of all the nations, baptizing..., teaching them to observe all...
- to be equipping the saints... to the building up of the body... in preparation for...
- to be making known the manifold wisdom of God to angelic authorities
- to be bringing God the eternal glory in Christ Jesus

We have also begun looking at the divine instructions for the structure and function of the N.T. church. We began with the most important priority of all – the prominence of the preeminence of the Lord Jesus.

This is where all the structure and function of the local church must begin, continue, and progress.

*** When the preeminence of Jesus is not the prominent thing in the church, then the church has no spiritual legitimacy.

The credibility of all structure and function in the church is eventually undermined if the preeminence of Jesus Himself is not prominent above all else.

It is surely a very grievous thing to the Lord when He is given less attention in the assembly than the building, programs, the staff and personnel, the well known individuals, the unique methods, the affiliations, or the social impact of the church.

We saw that the preeminence of Jesus is to be seen in the authenticity, the authority, the ability, the vitality, and the expectancy of the N.T. assembly.

Today we need to move on in the structure and function of the N.T. church, by considering the Lord's instructions regarding leadership in the local assembly.

Peter, and the other apostles were prominent during the first years of the church, but it isn't long in the Acts of the apostles, and you begin to notice the prominence of a separate and distinct group of leaders in the church – they are referred to as elders. Acts 11:30, 15:2-6, 15:22-23

This is the same Greek word that is used many times in the gospel accounts in reference to the religious leaders in Israel. But in the Acts of the apostles, for the first time it is clearly used in a very different sense.

This same word is then used quite often throughout the N.T. epistles in a very similar way.

From these passages we are able to observe some important patterns and instructions regarding the structure of leadership that the Lord has provided for His church.

I.) Every N.T. assembly had elders.

Acts 14:23 We have no N.T. examples of assemblies having only one elder.

There is only One who has the ability and authority to lead the church by Himself, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

This has been a significant problem in the church for a very long time. From very early on, in the history of the church, this has continued to create a dangerous weakness.

When one man – other than the Lord Himself – is given an exclusive authority and honor in the church, it almost always leads to serious problems.

This un-Scriptural approach to the church has created some of the most extreme perversions – a man conceived and born in sin being referred to by many as the most reverend, or his eminence, or the holy father.

This concept of ecclesiastical hierarchy was completely foreign to the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that Peter referred to himself as a sumpresbuteros – or a fellow elder. (I Peter 5:1)

2.) Elders are appointed by God.

The concept of a dictatorship, a royalty, a business or a democratic governance in the church is not to be found in the structure and function of the church as we observe it in the N.T.

The question of how elders are to be credibly appointed becomes especially problematic for the traditional American Christian. Most have no concept or experience other than a political approach to placing men in leadership positions in the N.T. assembly. This approach tends to leave a bad taste in the mouth of God's children – as well it should.

As God's children bring the mindset and presumptions of the world into the church of the Living God, everything having to do with leadership and authority becomes suspect. A political approach to a transcendent calling seems very inappropriate – or at least it ought to.

The apostle Paul's perspective may seem hopelessly idealistic, or even naïve, but only to those who are not spiritually minded. In Acts 20:28 Paul clearly understands that it is the Lord Himself who appoints those who are called upon to care for His assembly.

How does this actually take place? It takes place through the unique ministry of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the church of God. When the saints in a local assembly are paying attention to the work of the Spirit of God in their midst, it will become obvious to them -- who God has set apart for this calling. (Acts 13:1-2 -- the Holy Spirit does not need to speak audibly for us to know what He is saying)

One of our responsibilities (for all of us in the assembly), is to be making sure that we are walking in a right relationship to the Lord, so that we – as a body are being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit of God as He makes known to us His will for the local church. The Holy Spirit of God Himself is the One who is to be directing the structure and function of the church.

(Ephesians 2:19-22)

3.) Elders have been given a solemn responsibility by God.

As we look more closely at Acts 20:28, we are able to see quite clearly that God has appointed elders in His assembly for a very specific purpose;

“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.”

God's sovereign purpose for those He has appointed as overseers, is for them to shepherd His church.

There are three main areas of shepherding – guarding, guiding, and feeding.

guarding – requires alertness – taking the Lord's warnings seriously
Acts 20:28-31, Titus 1:9-11, I Tim. 4:1-3, II Tim. 3:1-5
spiritual discernment – healthy skepticism, close examination,
Scriptural evaluation Acts 20:32

loving faithfulness – constant vigilance, even church discipline
I Tim. 4:6

** Notice that faithfulness in guarding the flock of God begins with the elders guarding themselves first – even overseers need oversight!

Guarding also requires willing submissiveness of the flock, which is enhanced by the second area of shepherding;

guiding – requires first and foremost a godly example. The flock will become skeptical if there is ongoing inconsistency in the shepherd -- there must be right direction. I Timothy 4:12-16 (Isaiah 9:16)

also requires the maintaining of a focus on the Lord -- a recognition of the inherent and insidious dangers of even seemingly minor distractions

feeding – requires a steadfast commitment to the faithful teaching of the Word of God – even when the time comes that the flock will demand ear-tickling, eye-catching, self-serving, church candy. II Timothy 4:1-5

The shepherd knows instinctively what is best for the flock, but if he allows himself to be swayed too often by the momentary cravings of the Lord's people, he himself will lose his instincts for what is in their best interest in the long run.

Feeding the flock what they desperately need is not always fun or immediately gratifying for the shepherd, but has long term advantages impossible to gain any other way.

*** Ultimately, the elder's responsibility and devotion to shepherd, is to the **Chief Shepherd**.
I Peter 5:1-4

4.) Elders have been given gifts to fulfill their responsibilities.

The responsibility that we have just considered is obviously beyond the natural capacities of men. It is obviously impossible to expect the unregenerate to be able, or to even understand the significance of fulfilling this solemn responsibility.

But it is also impossible for even the faithful child of God to fulfill this kind of responsibility apart from a specific and supernatural enablement from the Lord Himself.

In Ephesians 4:11 we are given the explanation of how there can be any realistic hope of this responsibility being fulfilled.

There is something here that we need to be very clear about. It has to do with the last gifts that are mentioned here. There is much confusion concerning these last two gifts. But it is needless confusion. It is not that hard to understand if we are faithful to the overall Biblical context.

There are many – undoubtedly most – who see the word ‘pastors’ here as a completely separate gift and calling. A gift and calling separate from that of elders. This is a very important matter. It will, and does, have an enormous impact on the structure and function of the local church.

The word in the original here is poimen – it is a word that simply means shepherd.

In Acts 20:28, the verb form of the exact same word is used – poimaino – which means to act as a shepherd. In Acts 20:28 Paul gives this admonition to shepherd the flock of God to the elders from the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17). He does not give this admonition to only one of the elders, or to one man who is something more than an elder.

Paul clearly gives to these elders from Ephesus an admonition to be very careful and zealous as overseers, to shepherd the church of God. It is quite clear that the elders who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit would need to be gifted as pastors and teachers for them to fulfill the responsibilities of a shepherd.

The Greek words that are used to refer to elders, overseers, and pastors, are obviously used interchangeably for the same men in the church. There is no separate position of pastor, distinctly different than that of an elder or overseer.

This becomes even more clear from other passages in the N.T.

1 Peter 5:1-4 elders are shepherds of the flock of God under the authority of the Chief Shepherd – who is Christ Himself.

When Paul addresses his letter to the church at Philippi, it is obvious that he means to include each and every member of that local body. So who does he specifically include? All the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons. Is it possible that even though he mentions every other Scripturally designated group in that body – that he forgets to specifically mention the most prominent position of all – the pastor of the church there?

When Paul speaks of the gifts the Lord has given to the church in Ephesians 4:11, the gifts of pastors and teachers would have to apply to all of the overseers in the church, otherwise the overseers are given the responsibility to shepherd the flock of God, apart from the supernatural enablement of God specifically designed to provide for the guarding, guiding, and feeding of His precious flock.

If God has only granted this special Divine enablement for one of the elders, or for one apart from the elders, than why are all of the elders given such a solemn admonition from the apostle Paul in Acts 20?

From the Scriptural evidence I can only conclude that the prevailing concept of only one man in a church being 'the pastor' is un-Biblical.

No matter what the prevailing notions of most churches may be – our thinking, structure, and function must be in direct obedience to our Lord.

This has not been easy for most of us. When someone inevitably asks us who our 'pastor' is, we may have a tendency to hesitate or cringe, as we are uncertain how to answer the question concisely and truthfully.

The answer ought to simply be – we have three overseers/elders who are all responsible to shepherd the flock of God. Just think how impressed they will be – we have three pastors – most mega-churches only have one!

5.) God has provided specific qualifications for elders.

- The qualifications in I Timothy 3, and Titus 1 provide a specific means by which the church can be evaluating those who are being set apart by the Lord for this responsibility
- These passages (and several others), provide a continual reminder and challenge to those who are elders (and to the rest of the church) of the standard to which the Lord holds those who are given the unique privilege of shepherding His beloved flock.
- In I Timothy 3 we notice that there is a second office in the church, and that is the office of deacon. We notice from the title of this office that the focus of this office is serving, and that the qualifications are basically the same as for elder, with the exception of the gift of teaching. (only mentioned here and in Php. 1:1)

6.) Elders are equal in authority, different in contribution.

In the plurality of elders in each assembly we see an equality in authority and responsibility. No one of them is singled out as being distinctly different from the others in their authority and responsibility. But there is clear evidence that there will be distinctions in giftedness, diligence, and opportunity.

I Timothy 5:17 – elders will not likely be equal in function

7.) Godly elders encourage others to emulate them.

As godly elders imitate Christ, others will be encouraged to follow their example – and for some this will encourage them to aspire to the office of overseer.

But even more importantly, this will help to cultivate and maintain the prominence of the preeminence of Jesus in the vitality of the church, as every member is encouraged to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus.

This is going to need to be accomplished through more than just the elders of the local assembly – there will need to be many other saints who are also taking the preeminence of Jesus just as seriously.

This principle of imitating Christ, and in the process encouraging others to do the same ought to become a self-perpetuating spiritual invigoration in the body of Christ – with each and every member looking more and more intently to the Lord Jesus as the ultimate example and source of all that is really living.

Do we, as members of the church of the Living God, have any specific responsibilities in direct relation to those who are to be shepherding the flock of God under the example and ultimate authority of the Chief Shepherd?

- First and foremost, we need to pray Ephesians 6:19 “pray on my behalf”
I Thessalonians 5:25 “Brethren, pray for us.”

This needs to be our first priority in relation to those who have been given such a solemn responsibility – a failure to pray is a failure to take this seriously, and a failure to take this seriously, will result in serious problems indeed.

- Secondly, we need to be submissive to those in this important position. Heb. 13:17-18
 - when we are praying like we should, we will be more likely to be submissive as we should
 - when we are together recognizing the Holy Spirit’s authority in appointing these men, we should find submitting to them to be an opportunity to show our love for the Lord
 - submission ought to be our instinctive response to each member Eph. 5:21
- Lastly, we ought to appreciate and esteem the leaders God has provided. I Thess. 5:12-13
 - do not idolize them
 - do not despise them
 - do not ignore them
 - do not take them for granted