

Biblical Church Structure

Keith Evan Schubert
Cornerstone Bible Baptist Church
Redlands, CA

Chapter 1

Disciples / Believers / Brethren

And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Acts 2:40-47

1. belief causes baptism and this is synonymous with membership
2. doctrine
3. fellowship
4. communion
5. prayer

1.1 Membership

Christ builds His church:

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18

Christ died for the church and the church is both His body and His bride.

Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

Ephesians 5:21-33).

What is so key about these two passages? The church is the gathering of the faithful and salvation is not seen as separate from the church. Thus those who believe are in the church. You cannot be faithful to Christ and not be a member of the church He is building. To carry the image of Ephesians 5 out, not being an active member of a church is to be separated/divorced from Christ, which the Bible teaches is to never have been married to Christ. There are no maverick Christians. To be united to Christ is to be united with His church. That is what the church is: the gathering of the saints (literally).

1.2 Doctrine

But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works. I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

A well known passage. A passage I am sure we all love. Notice something important though. Paul is writing this to Timothy. Timothy the pastor and son in the faith of Paul. And Paul exhorts Timothy to rever the scriptures and to cling tighter to them. All of us can do and must do this.

We should be always reforming our thoughts, words, and ministry in light of scripture. Think of everything you say and do in light of scripture. Think of how you witness in light of scripture. Think of how the church is run in light of scripture. The counsel and teaching of men is vain, but the word of God stands forever. Bow to it.

One other thing that comes to mind from this and Hebrews 13:7,17 is this. We are to respect, love, and follow our elder and pastor Paul Donnelson. Since I have been here (6 mos) I can think of two occasions where disrespect and lack of love have marked peoples attitudes toward him. If he chastizes us it is for our good and we should thank him, and the Lord that we have a faithful man as an elder. The Bible does not permit a lack of love towards him. Those who he calls to account and refuse his Biblical admonition should not receive the succor of the church. We should not support such sinful attitudes, for to do so is to join them in opposition to the pastor God has given us. This does not mean we join a cult of Paul, but it does mean that we must hold in high regard our pastor and not allow disobedience to the faith by despising his counsel. We will speak more of this in the future, so for now let us look at the second point.

1.3 Fellowship

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 10:19-31

Notice how the passage starts - salvation by Christ causes us to draw near to Christ and hold on to our profession. What comes in light of this? Seeking to strengthen one another! How can we do this if we are not here? What does the passage say? We are not to forsake the assembling of the saints. The gathering of the saints does not mean Sunday morning worship, though that is certainly included. It means any gathering of the church: Sunday School, Worship, Sunday Evening, Wednesday night. We are not doing this. The Bible does not command us to rhetoric about it. The Bible does not command you to aspire to it. The Bible commands you to do it. Don't exhort people to go and not show yourself - that is hypocrisy. Now we certainly have to give

consideration for the Gee's who live an hour away in the mountains. Ideally, a local church should always be sought, but if there is none you must do your best to be as active as possible. Let me ask though how many of us (myself included) have invited them to spend the afternoon with us so they could come to evening church? Our desire should be to be in church and it should be a great reason why you are not. It should be great distance, severe health problems, or incapacitation that does it. If you can move the appointment you should. If you are feeling down you should certainly go. Your priority should be doing God's will, and God says He wants you to be in church and to love church. Look at what God says immediately following the exhortation to be in church - a fearful statement of damnation for disobedience. This is not my peculiar thinking, this is God's decree. If you treat God's gathering lightly, you treat Christ lightly. And if you give no thought to Christ, how can you be saved? This causes my heart to have an awesome, revered fear of the decree and it should yours also. Let us obey Him and come!

1.4 Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is a lengthy passage outlining the Lord's Supper or Communion. Notice several things from the passage. First, in verses 20, 26, 33-34 we see that communion is the regular practice of the church and is a proclamation of Christ. Second from verses 28-32 we see we should approach it reverently and with much thought. We have been lax in partaking of the Lord's Supper and it should not be so.

1.5 Prayer

We have spoken much of prayer in last several weeks so I will leave you with one main thought. Look at Ephesians 6:18. As the armour of God has just been laid out, what are we to do with it? How does a faithful believer act? Prayer. Never underestimate it!

Chapter 2

Deacons

Deacon is not a real English word. It is a transliteration of the Greek word Deaconos. Deaconos comes from the word to run. We talk of running errands, running around doing things, or doing the legwork. This is the idea of the word. It came to mean, in the days the New Testament, a servant or one who ministers to people's needs. It is thus frequently translated minister or servant. The word deaconos appears in many places in the New Testament, and is used in three senses.

One such use is a servant in the secular sense. These were not necessarily slaves, rather men who served or ministered to others needs. In Matthew 22:13 the king instructs his deaconos to bind the man who snuck into the wedding feast and throw him out. The servants or waiters at the wedding of Cana in Galilee (John 2) were literally deaconos. In Romans 13:4 the magistrate (government official) is called a deaconos of God.

The most common use of deaconos is of a faithful servant of the Lord. In Matthew 20:26, Matthew 23:11, Mark 9:35, and Mark 10:43, Jesus says the the one who would be great must be your deaconos. In John 12:26 Jesus speaks of those who would serve Him, and says that His deaconos will be where He is. In Romans 15:8 Jesus is Himself called a deacons because He served faithful. In 1 Corinthians 3:5 and 2 Corinthians 3:6 Paul is a deacons through whom people believed. The examples can be continued but I think it is clear that the word is used in this sense.

The final sense is the office of deacon. The word is only used this way twice in the New Testament. First in Philipians 1:1 and Second in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. The deacons are initiated in Acts 6:1-7 Though they are only referred to as "the seven" (Acts 21:8).

Qualifications:

1. respectable (grave)
2. sincere (not double-tongued)
3. not a drunk or drinker (not indulging in too much wine)
4. not greedy or money seeking
5. holding mystery of faith (v.16)
6. tested or proved (dokimadzo - test to see if genuine)
7. blameless
8. husband of one wife (one woman man)

9. rule children (they respect and obey)
10. run household well
11. wife should be similar (could refer to females who serve but this is questionable)

Purpose - help the elders with the physical running of the church. Note that this is not the spiritual aspects of the church, that is the role of the elders. There is no specific list of responsibilities because they are to help where the elders need them. They are not a board who oversees the running of the church, rather they are those who lead in serving. They are active Christians who evangelize and serve Christ. They are to be faithful, they are just not given to the ministry of the word. They are role models.

1. Acts 7 - Stephen
2. Acts 8 - Philip
3. Revelation 2:6,15 - Nicolas

Chapter 3

Elders / Overseers / Pastors

Elder is a much confused office. Many churches today oppose the position or name, not knowing that a pastor is an elder. Cults like the Mormons create different offices for each word thinking pastors, elders, bishops, and overseers are different things. Elders are bishops/overseers as we see in Titus 1:5-7. Bishops and overseers are different words used to translate the same Greek word (episcopos) so there is no difference in the original language. The term pastor is used of the office only once in the New Testament, and in Ephesians 4:11 we get the office of pastor/teacher. Note that they are not two offices. Each office is separated by the word some but not pastors and teachers. In the Greek the word 'de' (conjunction of continuation) is used to separate the list but pastor (poimen) and teacher (didaskalos) are separated by kai (conjunction with cumulative force). Why the fancy argument? Pastor (literally shepherd) were to watch over and guide the sheep which is what an overseer does. Teaching is the job of the elders so again there is a link between them. So the pastors, who are mentioned only once in the New Testament are functionally the same as the elders. As long as we are looking at the unity of this office I feel it important to mention that many see a degree of distinction in 1 Timothy 5:17. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding of the word 'Malista'. Note that in 1 Timothy 4:10 the same word is used to draw a "distinction" between salvation and belief. It really means especially in the sense of further explanation, not a subgrouping as we often use it today. This week we are going to look at the office of elder and next week we will look at the requirements.

Elder is the oldest office in the church, as it is carried over directly from the Old Testament. With the deacons we can see the inception in Acts 6, it is a special position with a particular purpose - to serve the physical needs of the church. Deacons are to be examples of how a mature believer acts but they are not given the job of spiritual instruction or oversight. That is the job of the elders. The elders served Israel and were to guide and judge them. To get a taste of what God had them do in the Old Testament lets look at a few passages.

Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt:

Exodus 3:16

And he said unto Moses, Come up unto the LORD, thou, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and worship ye afar off.

Exodus 24:1

And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.

Numbers 11:16-17

The elders of Israel are mentioned throughout the Bible as those who were responsible for leading the people of God. They are referred to as rulers, judges, and leaders of the people. While the position of elder is not new in the New Testament, it is interesting that more is said of the role and qualifications for this position than for that of Deacon, which is the new position. I think there are two big reasons for this. First, the elders of Israel had become corrupt (see for example Matthew 16:21). The example that would be most recent to the people was thus a bad one. Second there is a tendency among man to seek titles and positions. This is not acceptable for an elder. Many churches give this title as a reward or accolade, it is nothing of the sort. The position of elder is a position of service and trial. It is a hard position that calls for humility and patience. Since the position is hard the Bible instructs us as the people of God to make their job easy.

Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

Hebrews 13:7

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Hebrews 13:17

Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.

Hebrews 13:24

And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

The reason that I am emphasizing this is that this is the position that our pastor fills. We should be very grateful that God has given us such a good pastor. I know there is fear because pastor is sick and he has called on men like myself to serve while he gets better. Pastor is still in charge. He instructs what should be taught and who he wants to do it. A rumor has been started that we are looking for another pastor. Let it end now. Paul Donnelson is our pastor and will be till the Lord takes him home. We are not and will not look for a replacement, because he is filling it and Lord willing he will for a long time. Why mention this in the context of the passages

just read? Simply this, pastor has labored in this church longer than many of us remember. His life is wound up in it, and even recovering from his stroke his love and prayers are with us. We need to show some of this esteem, remembrance, love, and submission to him now. Let's take this opportunity to lift him up and let him know how we appreciate him, not shove him to the door. When you visit him, bring happiness and joy. Bring good tidings, prayers, and well wishes. Tell him how you love him, miss him, and look forward to his return. Encourage him as he has done for us. Make his walk joyous.

On another level we can encourage him by working together, staying faithful to the church, growing in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Pastor wants to see the church he labored in stay strong. It will be an encouragement to his heart to see us faithful even when he can't be here.

First note that elders are always appointed as part of the formation of a healthy church.

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

Titus 1:5

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Acts 14:23

To understand the role let's first look at the titles:

1. elder (presbuteros) - mature in the faith (can't be age because Timothy does the job of an elder and Paul exhorts him in 1 Timothy 4:12 not to allow his young age to be criticized. Because of the maturity, they were the leaders and rulers.
2. overseer (episcopos) - literally one who looks closely at something. This was used of a military general who did inspections.
3. pastor (poimen) - literally shepherd. A shepherd watched over, defended, healed, sought out, and loved the sheep in his care.
4. teacher (didaskalos) - one who instructs and teaches what is right.

God gave these men to fulfil this duty and to be an example. Why? Goal - Ephesians 4:12-17