

Sunday, August 30, 2009

Introduction and Review

The Identity of the Church

We have identified the church as all those who are joined to God by way of covenant through Jesus Christ. This is the church in the broadest sense—the *universal* church.

The Church through the Ages

We have seen that the church has existed from the beginning of time. It has experienced various changes and developments along the way, but the church is essentially *one* throughout its history. It is one church and one people.

This is important to understand for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is because it gives us a sense of being *rooted and grounded in history*. Our church—Trinity Evangelical Church—is not disconnected either from the historic church that stretches back through the ages to the beginning of time, or from the other faithful congregations of God's people in different parts of the world today.

As I mentioned last week, from Adam to Abraham the church lacked formal identity and organization. But beginning with Abraham the church began to take on a more clearly defined character. And we see it develop from that point forward. At first, the church consisted of a family, then of a tribe, then of a nation, and now of people from many nations. We might think of the church in the Old Testament period as a *national* church, consisting of Israel, whereas in the New Testament period it is a *transnational* church. There has been progress and development over time, but everything is rooted in the original promise given to Abraham.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3).

The church begins to take shape with this promise to Abraham. The church consisted at this time of a single family, but with a view to encompassing all the families of the earth, so that when we come to the NT we find the apostle John being given a vision in which he sees “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). Believing Jews are there. Believing Gentiles are there—Greeks and Romans, Babylonians and Persians, Egyptians and Arabs, Scythians, Goths, Angles, Jutes, and Saxons, Maasi, Seepek Iwam, Chinese, Native American Indians, Zulus, Mongolians, people from every land, every ethnic group, every language.

The Local Church

We have seen, as well, that this universal church finds expression in countless local congregations around the world.

We concluded last week’s message by introducing the subject of the organization and government of the local church. And as I pointed out then, the Scriptures teach us that local congregations are to have two classes of officers, namely, elders and deacons. We gather from a number of passages, but it comes out most clearly in Philippians 1:1 and in First Timothy 3.

In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses the letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the *overseers and deacons*.” As I mentioned last week, and as we shall see more clearly today, “overseer” is simply another name for “elder”.

We find the same classification of offices in the third chapter of Paul’s first letter to Timothy. He instructs Timothy concerning the qualifications for overseers/elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and deacons (vv. 8-13).

Elders and deacons are the ordinary, ongoing offices that remain in the church, as opposed to the apostles and prophets, which were *extraordinary* offices in the first century. The age of the apostles and prophets, with their unique gifts and callings, is past. They were called by God specifically to be witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to make known the mystery of the gospel, and to lay the foundation for the NT expression of the church (Eph. 2:20; 3:1-6). And they were given the power to work miracles as a confirmation of their calling. As Paul said, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with

signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor. 12:12). But the foundation of has been laid; the purpose for which Christ called these men to fill these offices has been fulfilled; and he has committed the ongoing care and nurture of the church to the officers that remain—the elders and deacons.

Now, the subject of church government might seem like a rather trivial one, but it’s far more important to the well-being of the church than what one might think. Every church has a government of one type or another, whether they are aware of it or not. The question is not whether there *is* or *isn’t* a government in the church, but what *kind* of government there is—whether or not it is structured on the pattern laid down for us in Scripture, and whether it is fulfilling its biblical role.

Now granted there is no place to turn to in the Scriptures where we get anything like a *detailed* explanation of how things are supposed to work. But there is enough revealed that we get the general outline.

Elders and Their Appointment

The first thing we learn is that local congregations are to be governed by elders. We are told that when Paul and Barnabas had preached the gospel in the cities of Galatia so that many people came to believe, and congregations were formed, they “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23).

When he wrote to Titus, he said, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Ti. 1:5). And he gives Timothy similar instructions in Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:1).

Now a word or two about this is in order. What is meant when it speaks of the elders being appointed? *How* were they appointed? Some have seen in this a basis for the practice of leaders in the local church being appointed by a regional bishop—a church leader from *outside* the local congregation, who has the oversight of several congregations in a given region, appointing local pastors.

But this isn’t really what’s going on here at all. Here’s one of many instances where remembering the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is very helpful. When Paul appointed elders in the congregations he founded, and when he had Titus do so in the churches of Crete, he was simply following the long-standing

practice of Israel. The Jews *elected* their tribal and community elders at least as far back as Moses.

“At that time I said to you, ‘I am not able to bear you by myself. The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. May the LORD, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you! How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will *appoint* them as your heads’ ” (Deut. 1:9-12).

Do you see what’s going on here? Moses tells them to choose wise, understanding, and experienced men, whom *he* would then appoint as their leaders. His “appointment” of them seems to have consisted of recognizing them as having been chosen by the people, giving them a charge to faithfully fulfill the duties of their office, and then (by prayer and the laying on of hands) commending them to the grace of God.

Their leaders, their elders, their judges, their rulers, then, were chosen by the people. Now this is very interesting. This is nearly 1,500 years before Christ and we have a representative form of government. We are told by secular historians that a republican form of government was first developed in Rome in 509 B.C., when the Romans overthrew the Etruscan kings and established their own senate as the supreme ruling council. But here we have elected representatives in Israel *a thousand years earlier*. Israel was organized politically as a loose confederation of tribes, each with their own elected leaders.

So Moses tells the people to choose their own leaders, but there were qualifications which had to be met. Those selected were to be wise, understanding, and experienced men.

This is how local towns and villages were governed also, so that you have local elders and tribal elders; and the tribal elders would consult with one another at a national level. But the point is they were chosen by the people.

This also is how Jewish communities in the Diaspora were governed, as well as local synagogues. The elders of the synagogue were elected by the members. This had been the practice for centuries.

And this is what we see happening in the NT, too. Consider what happens in the sixth chapter of Acts.

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:1-6).

Do you see? These seven men were not chosen by the apostles, but by the people. If ever we expected to see appointments from the top down we’d expect to see it in the Jerusalem church which had the personal presence and ministry of the apostles. If anyone would have had the authority to make such appointments by a top down administration, it would have been the apostles. But that’s not what we find. These seven men were not chosen by the apostles, but by the people. And when they were chosen, they were commended to God by prayer and the laying on of hands by the apostles.

Now almost every commentator assumes that these seven men were chosen to serve as deacons, largely because it mentions the more practical side of the oversight of the church—that of serving tables, ministry to the widows. Steve Schlissel is of the opinion, however, that these were elders. And since I never like to find myself on the opposite side of a question as Schlissel—because he’s smarter than I have ever dreamt of being—and also because he makes a pretty convincing case for it, I’m inclined to agree with him. I think these are elders.

Let me just very briefly explain why. Later in Acts we have several references to the elders of the church in Jerusalem (11:30; 15:2, 4, 6; 21:18). And if this is *not* an account of the selection of elders for the church, then we have no account of their selection at all. If they are deacons, it would be strange that we have an account of the selection of deacons and not of the elders.

But what I think is especially compelling is the fact that it was customary for Jewish communities to select what they called “seven good men” to serve as the public authority—the elders—for their community. What we have in Acts is essentially the formation of a new synagogue, a Christian synagogue, and it needed the oversight of elders. And in keeping with Jewish custom, the apostles provided for the selection of seven good men, seven elders to attend to the oversight of the church, while they devoted themselves to their mission and calling as apostles. It was fitting that they use their time and energy exclusively for the preaching of the gospel.

When these seven men were installed as elders, they assumed the responsibility of oversight of the church, and no doubt provided for the proper care of the widows, probably through the subsequent appointment of deacons.

But the thing I want you see is that the elders were not appointed—they were not selected, they were not set over the church—by the apostles directly. At the apostles’ instructions they were elected by the people. The apostles provided for the establishment of the office and probably presided over the election, but the leaders were chosen by the people and then commended to God by the apostles through prayer and the laying on of hands.

Now there are some churches that make much of what they call “apostolic succession”, by which they mean that their ministers can trace their ordination all the way back to the apostles, and that this is what gives their church validity—apostolic succession through ordination.

Rome claims this for herself. Canterbury claims this. The Eastern Orthodox Churches claim this.

But what are we to make of it? I would submit to you that true apostolic succession doesn’t consist in ordination, but in doctrine—in faithfully believing and proclaiming the gospel as it was preached by the apostles. This is true apostolic succession.

The bishops of the Episcopal Church claim apostolic succession through ordination. Maybe it’s true; maybe it isn’t. I don’t know; and I’m not sure they do either. But this is one thing I do know: on July 14, 2009, the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops voted to approve the ordination of practicing homosexuals to

“any ordained ministry.” This is not in keeping with the teaching of the apostles. And this is hardly the first time that church has departed in a significant way from apostolic authority. The Episcopal church left the realm of orthodoxy a long time ago. The ordination of homosexuals is just a symptom of a much deeper problem. So what has apostolic succession gotten them? Has it guaranteed their fidelity to Christ? Not at all!

And we could point to other significant departures from apostolic teaching in the other churches that claim apostolic succession through ordination.

Again, *true* apostolic succession is not measured by ordination, but by the faithful preservation, practice, and preaching of the apostolic gospel, that is, in fidelity to Scripture.

Now, let’s see, where were we? Oh yes...the selection of elders. The elders in the church in Jerusalem were elected by the people. And we find indications of the same thing in Galatia also. Remember it says that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). The Greek word used in this verse and translated as “appointed” means *to raise the hand to express agreement in a vote*.¹

Plurality of Elders

Another thing we should note is that each congregation was to have a plurality of elders—not just one, but several (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Tit. 1:5). A plurality of elders serves several important purposes.

- ❖ It provides for the division of labor (the work is simply too big for one man, and there is no way that one man will have all the gifts and graces necessary for the work)
- ❖ It provides for a greater repository of wisdom. “In an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14)

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9, p. 437. I should point out that Eduard Lohse, who wrote the article on χειροτονέω assumes it was Paul and Barnabas who nominated or elected the elders. It seems best to me, however, to assume Paul and Barnabas presided over the election and that they ratified by prayer and the laying on of hands the men selected by the congregation.

- ❖ It provides protection for the congregation against an abuse of power. Scripture recognizes the danger of the concentration of power. The church is not to be governed by a one man autocrat, even if he is a benevolent autocrat, because there is no guarantee that the man who comes in after him will be so benevolent.

The model that is so common in so many churches today of government by the pastor—a kind of one man rule—is really quite at odds with both Scripture and wisdom.

In our church we currently have three elders: Monte, Jeff, and myself. I, as the pastor, have no more authority in the decision-making process than either Monte or Jeff. There is not a hierarchy within the eldership.

Elders as Overseers and Pastors

I mentioned earlier that elders are sometimes referred to in Scripture as “overseers”. These two terms (elder and overseer) refer to the same office.

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint *elders* in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach... For an *overseer*, as God’s steward, must be above reproach (Tit. 1:5-7)

First they are referred to as elders, then as overseers—two different words for the same office. We see the same thing in Acts.

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the *elders* of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them... “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to care for [ποιμαίνειν, *pastor, shepherd*] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:17-18a, 28)

And if you want a third witness you have it in First Peter.

I exhort the *elders* among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising *oversight*, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you... (1 Pet. 5:1-2a)

So we have three words which are closely related to the same office: elder, overseer, and shepherd (or pastor, cf. Eph. 4:11). The word “elder” describes what the man *is*—normally an older man (wise and experienced). The word “overseer” refers to what the man *does*—he exercises oversight of the church. The word “shepherd” (or pastor), likewise refers to his work—he cares for the sheep by feeding them on the words of Scripture.

Deacons

We must move on and briefly consider the office of deacon. Scripture gives us much less information concerning this office. The only explicit mention of it is in First Timothy 3:8-13, where Paul gives the necessary qualifications of those eligible to serve as deacons. The *function* of the office is left explained. We are not entirely without guidance, however, because something can be learned from the word itself. The word “deacon” [διάκονος] simply means *servant*. The word is used most often, not of an office in the church, but in a more general way of someone who serves others. For instance, Paul says in Romans 15:8 that “Christ became a servant [διάκονος] to the circumcised”. Obviously he is not speaking of an office in the church. And in First Corinthians 3:5, Paul says, “What is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants [διάκονοι] through whom you believed”. He is not saying that they occupied the office of deacon in the church, but that they were servants in a more general way. There are many similar uses of the word in Scripture.

There is another indication of what the office entails (or maybe I should say what the office does *not* entail) in the list of qualifications which Paul gives for the office. This comes out when we compare the qualifications with those he lists for elders. The two lists are very similar. The chief difference is that elders are to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). But this is not required of deacons. Consequently, their role has normally been considered (and I think rightly so) to be of a more hands-on and practical nature. They are to serve the congregation by assisting the elders in the administration and oversight of the church in meeting the physical needs of the congregation. Usually this has been done by delegating the responsibility of managing the finances and taking care of the physical needs of church.

What’s in a Name?

Now we will be voting today on an amendment to our bylaws, seeking to change the name of our trustees to deacons. The reason for this is to more faithfully reflect

the biblical model of church government. Our trustees perform the work of deacons, why don't we call them deacons?

Someone might ask, "What's the big deal? What's in a name?" Quite a lot, actually. The name of the office influences how we think about it. Sometimes this is intentional. For instance, I don't know whether you know it or not, but there is a widespread push in the church growth movement to adopt a corporate model of leadership for the church. This is a self-conscious, intentional thing. There are those who say, "Look, there are a number of very successful, very prosperous corporations. Why not take a look at what they have done to achieve their success, and imitate it." And one of the things they have discovered is that many successful businesses have some things in common, often having to do with the style of management. And so the thinking goes, if these things have worked well for these businesses, perhaps they will work well for the church also. Let's adopt a business-like view of the church. And so, in many churches today, especially in many of the mega-churches, instead of a pastor, you have a CEO. Instead of elders, you have a leadership team, or a corporate board. The work of evangelism is like selling a product. Those who attend the functions of the church are viewed as consumers. And so on.

But there is a problem. The church is not a business. It is not selling a product. People are not just consumers. And when we view the work of the church in this way it inevitably skews the church's priorities and ends up corrupting the gospel.

And there is another reason to reject the movement. The whole enterprise assumes that we are wiser than God. God has outlined the pattern of government he wants for the church. And are we to say, "Thanks, but no thanks; we think something else will work better?" I don't think so. It's not our job to be innovative, but to be obedient.

When we use biblical terminology, we think biblically about the church, which is the way God wants us to think.