

The Nature of the Church - Part 2

Last week I began the first of several messages about the church, the body of Christ, and I am doing this with a certain question in mind. If I were to write up a church constitution with bylaws, what would I include, what would I leave out, and how would it be different from our present church constitution and bylaws? And I mentioned that my approach would be not necessary just to copy other church bylaws, but to examine the Scriptures and at least attempt to write a constitution as close the biblical model as possible. And last week I dealt with the issue of church membership. 1 Cor 12:13 teaches that at salvation, when we believe and are saved, at that point, the Holy Spirit baptizes each one of us into the body of Christ, and so each one of us at that time become a member of the church, of the body of Christ, making us a member also at that time of one another. And verse 18 of 1 Cor 12 says that God has placed the members, each one of them in the body just as He desired. And because of this, verse 27 says we are Christ's body and individually members of it, and as a result, Romans 12:5 says we are individually members one of another. And 1 Cor 12:11 says that the Holy Spirit gifts each individual member just as He wills, so that each individual member can function and take his proper role or her proper role within the body of Christ. And so my premise is that God creates members of the church through salvation, we do not do so through human voting. And as a result I mentioned several problems last week that I have with formal church membership, especially when human voted membership is used as a measure or a criteria for such things as whether a person is a member of the church or not, or when it is used as a measure or criteria to measure a person's spiritual commitment, or whether a person is qualified to take his proper place within the body. So if I were to write a church constitution I would write it to reflect as much as possible the biblical definition of a member rather than a definition based upon human voting which creates a distinction of member versus non member, a distinction which I have difficulty finding in Scripture. I would also write it to reflect as much as possible the biblical model of church leadership, which would somewhat change the whole concept of a voting membership in relationship to church leadership. So, first, church leadership.

Our current constitution makes room only for deacons. The biblical model includes both deacons and elders, and there are definite scriptural distinctions between them. God created the church, He creates the members, He gifts them as He wills, and their place and role within the body is according to His will, not ours. The church is a living organism, it is a spiritual union, and as God has ordained the make up of the church including its members He has also ordained leadership for the church and the structure of that leadership. And the Bible defines this leadership, its qualifications, and its function. And so I will begin with deacons.

1 Tim 3:8-13 refers to deacons and gives the qualifications. A deacon is, I think obviously, a recognized position within the church. Meaning that the place of a deacon is God-ordained, is a God-ordained position which God, Himself, equips and gifts people to fulfill. The place of deacon is a position therefore which the church should recognize and should be included in any attempt to define what the church is, its members and its leadership. The word itself, and how it is used in the New Testament helps define for us what a deacon is. It is a word which has primarily the idea of servanthood. The main

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reference is to the service or the benefit rendered to another and especially to the church as a whole. These deacons not only serve the members with various acts of help, but they also serve in the many, especially physical details that keep a church functioning. And in this sense, they serve the elders. They take care of the many physical aspects of a functioning church in order to free up the elders especially for prayer and for the teaching of the Word. The classic example, I think, is in Acts 6 where seven men, including Stephen, were chosen for the task of servanthood, food distribution, the serving of tables so the apostles would not neglect the Word of God. And the word deacon is not used there in that particular passage but they truly did function in the sense of a deacon and how it is defined later in the New Testament. They served, and they freed the elders up to pay attention to the Word. This word deacon had a fairly wide range of application. When Jesus changed the water into wine in John 2, this word is used of the servants who drew the water. Ministers, deacons, servants. But the apostle Paul also applies the word to himself in Col 1:23, and in a few other places, as God having made him a minister, a servant, a deacon of the church, which means that though there are distinctions between an elder and a deacon, there is also a certain amount of overlap of function, and especially overlap of, I would call it disposition or attitude. An elder also must be a servant and have that disposition and attitude, but a deacon also has room to teach. But the primary roles are still in tact. An elder, overseer, shepherd, teacher, versus a servant deacon taking care of things.

And as I studied this, I got a couple of additional impressions. First, a true deacon will be gifted by the Spirit, and motivated by God to be a servant. This is a role that will fulfill such a person rather than be a drudgery. If a person cannot do it with a cheerful willingness, then he must wonder if he is in his proper role, his proper place within the body of Christ, or within the local church.

Second, a deacon is not a self-appointed position. Such a person can be recommended by the body, but must be approved by the elders, as in Acts 6 and as 1 Tim 3:10 says, these men must also first be tested, and then let them serve. This means that someone that would function well as a deacon already has the gifts and the attitude to do so, and the people in the church notice it. And the people in the church will have that sense that the person is in the right place if he is appointed and then functions as a deacon. And this highlights, I think for all of us, one of the aspects of our search for our proper place within the body of Christ. There are a number of aspects, but one of them, there is great wisdom in listening to the assessment of our beloved brethren, people who we can trust to give us a proper assessment of who we are, some of whom over time become aware of what we are and what we do well. Because it's often the genuine benefit experienced by others through us which reflects our true giftedness and role within the body.

Now, the elder. There are several words used for this position, and the words seem interchangeable. As with deacon, the words used to describe this person, the elder, help define his role. 1 Tim 3 uses the word, in some translations, bishop, in some translations, overseer. 1 Peter 5 adds the word shepherd, at least in verb form as possibly the very main function of an elder. In Titus 1:3 and 5 interchange the words overseer and elder to describe the same person, the same position.

First, a look at the words. 1 Tim 3:2 says, "An overseer then must be above reproach" and then it goes on to describe the rest of the qualifications. The word behind overseer is interesting. It's compound.

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The first part has the idea of superimposing one thing over another, and the second part has the idea of simply looking or peering about, thus overseer. Very simple translation. The person can be described as a superintendent, a watcher, someone who is aware and looks after things in the sense of caring for the people. This especially refers to someone who has the oversight of the spiritual life of the church, the spiritual direction, the spiritual atmosphere. And so referring to elders, 1 Pet 5:2 says "Shepherd the flock of God among you exercising oversight." And the word picture is of a shepherd with a flock of sheep, and all the major duties of a shepherd are pictures or analogies of what the major duties of an elder, overseer are. They include tending, caring for, guiding, guarding, feeding. It means the elder must understand the dangers facing the flock, the body of Christ. It means the elder must know the Word of God and be able to consistently teach it. He must have the gift of teaching. *He must have the gift of teaching.* And in 1 Tim 3 in the qualifications listed for both deacons and elders, this is the one major difference. In 1 Tim 3:2 it says that the overseer must be able to teach, and this is not a requirement for the deacon. And in other scriptures which define the job or the function of an elder we find that properly and consistently teaching God's word is essential to this position. 1 Tim 5:17, in referring to elders, says that those who work hard at preaching and teaching are worthy of double honor. And 1 Thes 5:12,13 says that those who diligently labor and have charge and give instruction are to be appreciated and highly esteemed and loved. Plus, the whole idea of tending involves feeding. And this means the proper and consistent teaching of God's Word. In John 21:15-17 Jesus said to Peter, as you well know, "If you love me tend my lambs... shepherd my sheep... tend my sheep." The Greek behind shepherd is the same word Peter used in 1 Peter 5:2 where he wrote to the elders, "Shepherd the flock of God." And the word behind "tend," tend my sheep... tend my lambs, same word, the word behind "tend" primarily means to feed. It literally means to pasture, to fodder, to graze. And there are so many applications and connections that can be made from this truth. And I think the main one is this. If you have ever found yourself in a church where God's word is not wholly taught, and where God's word is not consistently and properly taught, the people will be spiritually sickly, just like malnourished sheep. Regardless of how they might estimate their own spiritual welfare, if the word of God is not consistently being given, the people will be spiritually malnourished and sickly. It is the role of the elder-overseer, and I include in this context the pastor-teacher, it is his role to wholly and consistently and properly teach God's Word. And this is crucial. It is indispensable. And if he is doing so, and the people are responsive to God's Word, than this sets the whole tone, it sets the very atmosphere within the church and it is an atmosphere where the people are spiritually sound, healthy and free. All elders, all pastor-teachers have shortcomings. But if he is consistently and properly teaching the Scriptures, he has gone a long way toward fulfilling his ministry and his role. But if he fails in this one thing, everything else that he does will come up short. Everything.

In my early years of knowing Christ when I was involved with the Navigators we used to go to conferences twice a year. And if a conference was really well put together, and the logistics smooth, but the main speaker fell flat, the conference was considered a failure. It just left an empty spot. But if we went to a conference which was a jumbled mess, and the logistics a nightmare, but the speaker really knew how to, and was gifted to bring the Word of God to the people, the conference was considered a great success. And I cannot overemphasize the power of God's Word to make the Christian experience full regardless of all of the emptiness in the world around us and regardless of how many things go

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wrong in our lives. An overseer, a shepherd, an elder. The word elder also helps define the role. In Titus, as I've mentioned, chapter 1, the words elder and overseer are interchangeable describing the same position, the same person. Paul wrote to Titus in chapter 1 verse 5 appoint elders in every city, and then gave the qualifications. And the word elder means older, elderly, senior, someone who is older. But the main force of the word has to do not just with age, but with the experience and seasoned wisdom that age is supposed to bring. It just takes time. It takes years to pack in enough life experience to bring about a well-seasoned, godly character. In line with this, one of the qualifications for an elder in 1 Tim 3:6 is that he not be a new or recent convert. Any time anyone obtains oversight of other believers too soon, damage will be done, delicate situations can be mishandled, people will be wounded, and some believers just might be tripped and offended for a long time. An elder is to grow into the balance of love and truth, great patience, *great patience*, I can emphasize that again and again, and gentleness. His leadership is to be one of servant hood, setting the example in love. And yet, there is authority also, inherent within the position. But the authority is to be exercised in such a fashion as to hardly even be noticeable. Especially in the whole sense of how the world thinks about authority. But authority is there. And it is seen in the biblical descriptions of an elder's function.

1 Tim 5:17 says the elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor. The elders who rule well. And to rule means to be over, to stand before in rank, to preside. 1 Peter chapter 5:2 tells the elders to exercise oversight. 1 Thess 5:12 speaks of those who have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction. To have charge means the same thing as rule. Hebrews 13:17 says that the leaders keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account but just prior to this the verse says obey your leaders and submit to them. Inherent within the very concepts of obedience and submission is the idea that leaders have been appointed by God to preside over the church. That's why the qualifications are so exact. Now I must give several perspectives on this.

First, these instructions for the elders to preside over and have charge are not just suggestions. They are part of the God-given calling, definition, role, job of how leadership is to function. If the elder side-steps this part of his role, then he is not completely fulfilling the ministry that God has bestowed upon him.

Second, there is always the temptation to either overdo this authority, or under do it. And so 1 Pet 5:2,3 says to the elders, "exercise oversight, not under compulsion, not for sordid gain," and then it says, "nor yet as lording over those allotted for your charge." Lording means to control, to subjugate, to overcome.

We were discussing this very thing in the adult Sunday school class a couple of weeks ago. The Bible says to obey your leaders, and my question was, "There are limits to this, what are the limits?" And I think the consensus was, the limits are the Scriptures themselves. Meaning that, it is proper to obey and submit to leaders, spiritual leaders, whose instructions are based only upon the Scriptures and the principles within Scripture. Anything beyond this falls into legalism and oppression, and I would say just plain meddling. And because within our society that whole concept of authority/submission is not a very popular concept, there is also the possibility of under doing authority.

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And this is where I have another problem with our present church constitution. As it is, we have members, non-members. Members have the right to vote. Majority rules, not necessarily elders rule. Some of the authority that should reside and stay within the hands of the elders I think has been transferred to the sheep. It's very possible, because over time personalities within a church can change, it's very possible that if a certain issue comes up for a vote, and the leaders believe, the elders believe that it should go one way but the majority of the members believe that it should go another way, a vote is taken, and the rulership, the oversight of the elders has been thwarted, and a clear principle of Scripture broken. It's even possible that a small clique having great powers of persuasion could convince the majority of voting members to take the church down a path that elders know would be harmful. And so we would have believers unqualified for spiritual leadership ripping that very leadership away from the qualified elders and possibly taking the church down a path to destruction.

Therefore, if I were to write up a church constitution, I would not include a voted-in membership that then has the power of a binding majority vote, a vote which could subvert the biblical pattern of elder rule. In broad terms without all the details yet, I would put together something like this. I would do away with members being voted in. Anyone who is saved is a member based upon the truth that God made them a member as part of the very salvation experience. And I would do away with the possibility of a binding majority vote. And I think that all of this would favor the biblical definition of a member rather than the human definition of a member. And it would do away with the whole member/non-member terminology and distinction. It also favors, I think, elder oversight as the Bible defines it rather than majority vote which allows the possibility, at least, of overthrowing the biblical principle of a plurality of elders having oversight, having the leadership. But the balance to this is that elders are still accountable to the congregation and to one another. 1 Tim 5:19 says that it's possible for an accusation to be brought against an elder on the basis of two or three witnesses, and that's anybody within the group. And 1 Pet 5:2 tells the elders to shepherd the flock, and inherent within the idea of a shepherd is knowing the condition of the flock. And involved in knowing the condition of the flock is a lot of interaction, involvement, watching, and listening. Therefore, especially with a group this size, in writing up a constitution I would include the elders and the deacons meeting with the congregation on all the major issues, sounding them out, asking questions and listening, allowing for a complete airing and discussion concerning the issue, and then allowing for a vote, but a non-binding vote. In this way, the elders and the deacons have listened to the people, taken into account their biblical perspectives on the issue, but the final decision, the rulership and oversight would stay within the prerogative of the elders who have been, or should have been by this time, examined closely as to their qualifications to be involved in leadership. And the biblical pattern of church government would be honored.

If you have any comments ideas or questions, there are lots of side issues that I can't address because of time in one Sunday or one message, but if you have any comments ideas or questions, please let me know. I am simply convinced that where the Bible gives definitions and patterns for things, the most benefit comes to the most people if we follow those biblical definitions and patterns rather than just follow the cultural patterns around us.