



*The  
New Testament  
Church*

*A study of  
the  
Structure and Function  
of the  
Early Church*



Erhard H Hermann

This article may be used for the Glory of God

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# The Biblical Church

## Introduction

With so many different churches and structures, are there guidelines and examples from Scripture that we can learn from? What did the early church look like? Is the way the early church operated descriptive or prescriptive or both? We can start by looking at the beginning. God created mankind in His image and desired for people to fellowship with Him and one-another.

## The Beginning

When God first created Adam and Eve, they were in harmony with God. From the text, we can see that they were used to being in the presence of God, since after they sinned, they made fig leaves for coverings and hid themselves from God. (Gen 3:7-10) We do not have a lot of information on this time period. We do see that offerings and sacrifices were made to God and that Abraham built alters to the LORD. Mankind, after the fall, continued to sin more and more until Noah was the only righteous person and God judged the whole world with the flood. A lesson to be learned from this is: when society in general allows evil to exist, the evil will overtake the whole society with severe consequences.

## A nation for Himself

God chose Abraham to be the father of a people that would follow and love Him. When Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, God made a covenant with them to be His people and to obey Him. The commandments were given to create a pure nation. The offices of priests and Levites were instituted. Those that were disobedient were to be disciplined according to the commandments. The people did not obey God's commandments and allowed evil in their midst. This disobedience led to their downfall.

## A people for Himself

When Jesus came, He established the church. The word that is used for church “ἐκκλησία” (Ekklesia) has the following definition<sup>1</sup>.

- 1.** a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly
  - a.** an assembly of the people convened at the public place of the council for the purpose of deliberating
  - b.** the assembly of the Israelites

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<sup>1</sup> (Thayer 1889)

- c. any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance, tumultuously
- d. in a Christian sense
  1. an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting
  2. a company of Christian, or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs, according to regulations prescribed for the body for order's sake
  3. those who anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body
  4. the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth
  5. the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven

From this definition, we can see that the word really speaks of an assembly of people, and in the Christian sense, all believers. It has a fairly wide range of meaning ranging from a small group to the whole body of believers. One notable observation is that participation in this group is voluntary as compared to the previous groups. People freely choose to be a part of this group that wants to fellowship with God and obey His commands. Anyone that repents of their sins and accepts Jesus' payment for their sins and takes Him to be Lord and Savior is a member of this group. As in the covenant with Israel, those who disobey are to be disciplined so that the group will be pure. Along with the purity issue, discipline is the desire for the person to repent and again be a part of the church.

## Examples in Scripture

### Meeting places

There are several meeting places for the believers that are mentioned.

- Jesus says that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there. (Mat 18:20)
- The disciples had gathered and shut (likely locked and barricaded) the doors on the evening of the day that Jesus rose from the dead. This is where Jesus appeared to them. (Jn 20:19)
- After Jesus' ascension, they met in the upper room where they were staying. (Act 1:13)
- They would meet together in the temple. (Act 2:46)
- In Solomon's portico which was on the East side of the temple. (Act 3:11, 5:12)
- They were meeting in various houses. (Act 5:42)
- There are times when the church in a place refers to all the believers in that place. (Act 11:22, 12:1, Ro 16:1)
- Paul met with the disciples in the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. (Act 19:9)

- When Paul was in Rome awaiting trial, he welcomed all who came to him in his rented quarters. (Act 28:30)

From these examples, we can see that there was no specific place to meet. It ranged from meeting in homes, the temple or other available place.

### Who is the “Church” in the New Testament?

There are a number of references to the church in the New Testament.

Matt. 16:18; 18:17; Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3-4, 22, 41; 16:5; 18:22; 20:17, 28; Rom. 16:1, 4-5, 16, 23; 1 Cor. 1:2; 4:17; 5:12; 6:4; 7:17; 10:32; 11:16, 18, 22; 12:28; 14:4-5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 33-35; 15:9; 16:1, 19; 2 Cor. 1:1; 8:1, 18-19, 23-24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Gal. 1:2, 13, 22; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-25, 27, 29, 32; Phil. 3:6; 4:15; Col. 1:18, 24-25; 4:15-16; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:1, 4; 1 Tim. 3:5, 7, 15; 5:16; Phlm. 1:2; Heb. 12:23; Jas. 5:14; 3 Jn. 1:6, 9-10; Rev. 1:4, 11, 20; 2:1, 7-8, 11-12, 17-18, 23, 29; 3:1, 6-7, 13-14, 22; 22:16

As we look at these verses, we can see several things:

- Jesus said that He would build His church. (Mat 16:18) This defines the church as those who believe in Jesus and have accepted Him.
- Herod laid hands on some who “belonged” to the church. (Act 12:1)
- Paul tells the Ephesian elders to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Act 20:28)
- Paul commanded the Corinthians to judge those within the church but not those outside. (1 Co 5:12)
- Jesus Christ is the head of the church. (Eph 5:23, Col 1:18)
- Paul speaks to Timothy of those outside the church. (1 Ti 3:7)
- “The household of God is the church of the living God”. (1 Ti 3:15)

The Greek work “ἐκκλησία” (Ekklesia)<sup>2</sup> is used 114 times in the New Testament. 112 times (In the NASB) the word (or context) is translated “church” or “churches” since the context clearly means the believers of Jesus Christ. The other instances clearly refer to instances where the assembly consisted of either no believers or a mixture of believers such as the “congregation” that God led out of Egypt or the crowd that gathered in Ephesus against Paul. (Act 7:38, 19:32)

Based on this, we can confidently say that “church” refers to a group of Christian believers that can meet in any number of places and the whole Christian church itself. In the New Testament writings, “church” does not refer to a building. We do, however, use the word “church” to refer to a building now. What we really should be referring to is the group of believers who are meeting at a particular place, since the building itself is not the church.

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<sup>2</sup> (Thayer 1889)

## Structure

The organizational structure of the New Testament church was different from the Old Testament covenant. In the Old Testament regulations, the priests were to be descendants of Aaron, the first priest. The Levites were to be the “helpers”, so to speak.

During Jesus’ ministry, he chose twelve disciples who were to be His closest companions and that He would invest His time in. Of these, there was a closer “inner circle” that consisted of Peter, James and John. Peter is generally named first and in Mat 16:18, Jesus said that He would build His church on Peter. At the beginning of Acts, Peter takes the lead. (Act 1:15, 2:14, 2:37, 5:3-8). As the church was rapidly growing and as they were helping the poor and the widows, problems crept in as the widows that were “Hellenistic” (those that had accepted more of the Greek language and possibly customs)<sup>3</sup> were being discriminated against. (Act 6:1)

The functions of the leaders are now clarified. The main leaders, in this case, the twelve apostles, were to spend their time in prayer and the ministry of the word. (Act 6:4). The people that were chosen to address the discrimination issue were to be “men of good reputation and full of the Spirit and wisdom”. (Act 6:3). An important note here is that the men were to be full of the Spirit; simply being good at something (being good administrators) was not sufficient. Paul picks up on this later in his letters to Timothy and Titus. Stephen, one of the seven chosen for this ministry performed signs and wonders and was proclaiming the Gospel. (Act 6:5-9). Philip, another of the seven was preaching the gospel and performing signs. (Act 8:5-40). He is also called the “evangelist” and had four virgin daughters that were prophetesses. (Act 21:8-9).

By the time that we get to Acts 12:17, it appears that James, the half-brother of Jesus has taken on the leadership of the church. When Paul comes to Jerusalem to discuss the dispute regarding the application of the Mosaic law to the Gentiles, James appears as the leader of the church. At this point, there are also elders of the church. (Act 11:30, 15:4, 21:18). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches. (Act 14:23). Titus is commanded by Paul to appoint elders in every city. (Tit 1:5). Paul gives instructions on the person and character of an “elder” “overseer” and “deacon” to both Timothy and Titus. (1 Ti 3:1-7, Ti 1:5-9, 1 Ti 3:8-13). The terms elder and overseer do not seem to be specifically defined. In 1 Ti 5:17, the role of elders is at least preaching and teaching, but it also suggests other leadership functions. Paul uses elder and overseer interchangeably. (Act 20:17, 28). They are to “shepherd” the church. (Act 20:28, 1 Pe 5:2). Peter was commanded to shepherd the church. (Jn 21:16). The apostles Peter and John call themselves a fellow elder. (1 Pe 5:1, 2 Jn 1:1, 3 Jn 1:1).

The word for elder “πρεσβύτερος” (presbuteros)<sup>4</sup> just means older or advanced in age. The usage indicates that it was also considered a function or office in the Christian context.

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<sup>3</sup> (Polhill 1992)

<sup>4</sup> (Gerhard Kittel 1985)

There was definitely a structure in the early church. The apostles, elders, overseers and shepherds appear to be those that would have the most authority and responsibility. The list in Corinthians suggests that some “gifts” were greater than others. (1 Co 12:28-31)

James warns *Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.* (James 3:1 NASB95)

*The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.* (1 Tim. 5:17 NASB95)

The word for Deacon “*διάκονος*” (diakonos)<sup>5</sup> means someone who serves, for example, as a waiter (Lk 17:8, Lk 22:27, Jn 12:2). It has a wider range of meaning, while all the while retaining the “serving” aspect. (Mat 25:35-40, Mk 9:35). It ranges from serving tables to providing other physical and emotional needs for people. The writer of Hebrews states that angels are ministering spirits sent to render service. (Heb 1:14)

### Serve

Jesus Himself set the example of the leader coming to serve. (Mat 20:20-28, Jn 13:14-15, Lk 22:24-26). The apostles set the same example of serving, even though they were the leaders. (1 Co 9:19, Gal 5:13, 1 Ti 3:10, Act 20:35, 2 Co 12:15). The whole concept of being a “shepherd” comes into play here. The duty of a shepherd is to take care of the flock. (Jn 10:11-16, Jn 21:15-17, Act 20:28-31, 1 Pe 5:2). Thus, we see that the leaders are to lead, serve, nurture and protect the church and not “lord” it over the congregation, much as the husband is to love, care for and protect his wife. Paul instructs Timothy and Titus on the qualifications of elders and deacons. The qualifications primarily relate to being spiritually mature, upright and above reproach, able to teach, free from the love of money and not a new convert. (1 Ti 3:1-13, Ti 1:5-9)

### Rule, Manage and Lead

The word that is translated “rule” in 1 Ti 5:17 is translated several ways. It is used 8 times in the New Testament.

Verse	NASB	ESV	CSB	LEB
<b>Ro 12:8</b>	leads	leads	leading	leads
<b>1 Th 5:12</b>	have charge over	are over	lead	rule
<b>1 Ti 3:4</b>	manages	manage	manage	managing
<b>1 Ti 3:5</b>	manage	manage	manage	manage
<b>1 Ti 3:12</b>	managers	managing	managing	managing
<b>1 Ti 5:17</b>	rule	rule	leaders	lead
<b>Tit 3:8</b>	engage	devote	devote	engage
<b>Tit 3:14</b>	engage	devote	devote	engage

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<sup>5</sup> (Gerhard Kittel 1985)



As we examine these passages, it becomes even more clear that part of leading involves taking care of those that they are over or in charge of. (1 Pe 5:3). It also means that they are to oversee the operation of the group.

As indicated earlier, the ministry of the Word was one of the main responsibilities of the leaders. (Act 6:4). As a part of this, the elders were responsible for guarding the true doctrines from those that would pervert them and draw people after themselves. We see that even in this early state of the church, there were false doctrines creeping into the church. (Act 20:28-31, Heb 13:17, 1 Ti 1:3-4, 1 Ti 4:1-13, 1 Ti 6:1-5, 2 Ti 3:16-4:4, Tit 2:15, 2 Pe 3:14-18, Mat 22:29, Mat 24:24, 3 Jn 1:9-10).

So, as we recap, the elders, overseers, bishops or shepherds were the men who were to lead the church, preach, teach and maintain the true doctrine of the faith. The deacons had a ministry that focussed on the physical, and possibly more menial tasks in the church. Regardless of the office or position, the people that were in those positions were to be spiritually mature and of excellent character.

#### Method of entering leadership

We have some examples of how people were chosen and instated into leadership positions. The first one is the replacement of Judas Iscariot. (Act 1:20-26). In this case, the criteria was that the person had to have been with them from the baptism of Jesus by John to his ascension. Two people were chosen as candidates and a lot was cast to see which one God had chosen. The second instance is the choosing of the seven men to serve as deacons. (Act 6:1-6). The congregation was instructed to select men who were of “good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom”. (Acts 6:3 NASB95). The apostles then prayed and laid hands on them.

Paul was appointed to be the apostle to the Gentiles by Jesus Himself. (Act 9:3-17, 1 Ti 2:7, Ro 1:1).

The elders were appointed by Paul and the other evangelists. Based on the instructions in 1 Ti 3:1-12 and Tit 1:5-9, it would appear that at a minimum, the evangelists were to assess the character of the people that would be elders and deacons. Titus was left in Crete for this very purpose, to appoint elders. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church. (Act 14:23).

Elders were to be recompensed for their work. (1 Ti 5:18). Any accusations against elders need to be brought forward by at least two or three people. Elders that sin are to be rebuked in the presence of the whole church so that the rest will also be fearful of sinning. (1 Ti 5:19-21)

As we look at these examples, it is evident that

- Character and spiritual maturity were of utmost importance.
- While the congregation may have had a part in suggesting people that were fit to be elders, they were appointed by the evangelists and apostles. Elders were chosen by the leadership already in place.



- Note the warning that Paul gives: *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.* (2 Tim. 4:3-4)
- Elders were to be men. (1 Ti 3:2-5, Tit 1:6-9)
- Women were not to have authority over a man. (1 Ti 2:11-14, 1 Co 11:3-13). This instruction in Timothy is placed just prior to the section on the qualifications for overseers (elders) and references back to Adam and Eve, thus taking it out of any cultural context.
- In the choosing of the seven, the congregation chose the deacons based on their spiritual and moral character.
- There is no mention of deacons being appointed by the leadership; though with the seven, the apostles prayed for them and laid hands on them.
- The instructions given for the qualifications of deacons seems to indicate that both men and women could be deacons. (1 Ti 3:8-12)
- Women were involved in ministry. (Mat 27:55, Mk 15:41, Lk 8:3, Php 4:3, 1 Ti 3:11, Tit 2:3-4, Act 18:26, Ro 16:1-15, Act 21:9, 1 Co 11:5)
  - Women cared for Jesus and supported Him and His disciples.
  - Women were co-workers with Paul in proclaiming the Gospel.
  - Women are to teach what is good and encourage younger women.
  - Women worked to spread the Gospel.
  - Women were prophets.

## The Body

The church body is composed of believers who are to work together and minister to one another just as the various parts of the physical body work together to function as a single being. (Ro 12:4-13, 1 Co 12:12-27, Eph 4:4-16, Eph 4:29-32, Heb 13:1-3)

## Gifts of the Holy Spirit

There are several gifts and ministries that are listed. These gifts are all to be used to build up the body of Christ. *“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”* (1 Peter 4:10 NASB95) (1 Co 12:7, 1 Co 14:12, Eph 4:11-13). The terms: Pastors, Shepherds, Elder and Leader are pretty much synonymies. They all refer to servant leadership.

- Apostles
- Prophets, prophecy
- Pastors (shepherds)
- Leading
- Teachers
- Miracles

- Healing
- Helps, service
- Administration
- Evangelists
- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Faith
- Distinguishing of spirits
- Tongues
- Interpretation of tongues
- Exhortation
- Mercy

It would appear that the Holy Spirit could provide other gifts that would be used to build up the church that do not fall into any of the above categories. The definition of the gifts is not necessarily very precise and there is an overlapping of the gifts. People can have more than one gift. Timothy is exhorted not to neglect the spiritual gift that was bestowed on him, but to “kindle” it afresh. (1 Ti 4:14, 2 Ti 1:6) This would seem to indicate that we need to apply ourselves to use the gifts that are given to us for the good of others. (1 Cor 12:4-31, Ro 12:6-8, Eph 4:11-13). It should be noted here that it is not only the leaders who are to exercise their spiritual gifts; everyone in the church is to be involved. In fact, the majority of the ministry to one another should really come from the whole body. (Mat 25:34-40)

The believers in the church shortly after Pentecost set a really good example on how the church should function. They were:

- Proclaiming the gospel. (Act 2:1-40, Act 6:9, Act 8:5)
- They were devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. (Act 2:42, 46, Act 5:42)
- They were sharing and helping those in need. (Act 2:44-46, Act 4:32-35)
- They were healing people and driving out demons. (Act 2:43, Act 3:6, Act 4:30-31, Act 5:12, 15-16, 19, Act 6:8, Act 8:6)
- They were providing food for the widows. (Act 6:1)

### Instructions for the church

The whole New Testament provides instructions for believers and how they should live their lives. Jesus summed it up by saying:

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” “This is the great and foremost commandment. “The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”” (Matthew 22:37–40 NASB95)*

Essentially, the Scriptures are an exposition and explanation of what this means. God has explained it through historical stories, direct teaching and parables. Jesus in the “sermon on the mount” speaks of people who will be blessed and continues on with many instructions on how to live life. (Mat 5 to 7). The church is to be a caring, nurturing community where the truth is taught. The Scriptures are the inspired and authoritative Word of God. (2 Ti 3:16, 2 Pe 1:20-21) It should be a community of believers that encourage one another to “love and good deeds” and to keep away from sin. (Heb 10:24-26). There is to be no division within the church where some people follow one person and others follow someone else. (1 Cor 1:10-13, Php 2:1-4, Ro 12:16, Eph 4:1-7). The church, especially the elders, must maintain the purity of doctrine. (Tit 1:9-11, 1 Ti 1:3-11, 1 Ti 6:3-5, 2 Ti 4:2-4, Tit 2:7, Gal 1:6, 1 Th 4:1-8, Act 20:27-31). Scripture is authoritative and not subject to one’s own interpretation. (Mat 5:18, Luk 16:17, 2 Ti 3:16, 2 Pe 1:20-21)

Acts 15 gives a good example on the method of resolving doctrinal issues. In this case, some people were trying to teach the Gentiles that they had to follow the law of Moses. Paul, Barnabas and some others went to the elders and apostles in Jerusalem to resolve this. The apostles and elders met together to discuss this. They debated the issue with the various viewpoints being examined. Peter explained how God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as they themselves had received it at the beginning. Paul and Barnabas related the signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles. After everyone was heard, James, as the leader, used Scripture as the basis for his judgement.

The church is to be kept pure. In Corinth, a man lay with his father’s wife and the church thought that they were being really loving, caring and accepting by not dealing with this sin. Paul rebukes them for this. He says that if you allow a bit of sin, it will work itself through the whole church. (1 Co 5:1-7). The church was instructed to discipline this man by removing him from their fellowship. (1 Co 5:13, Deu 17:7). The Corinthian church obeyed Paul and put the man out of their fellowship. The man then repented and Paul had to instruct them to take him back into their fellowship. (2 Co 2:6-8). We can see that when a church is functioning correctly, people will miss being in that nurturing environment and when removed from it, because of sin, can bring about repentance.

Believers are to be baptized upon confession of faith and participate in the “Lord’s Supper”. (Act 2:38, Act 8:36-38, Lk 22:15-20, 1 Co 11:23-28)

## Conclusion

The Biblical church consists of all those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior by faith. While most of the information is descriptive, there are also prescriptive portions. The elders (overseers, shepherds) are to be men above reproach, spiritually mature and lead with a servant attitude. The leaders are responsible for maintaining a pure doctrine and dealing with those that would introduce error. The elders are primarily responsible for prayer, teaching and preaching. They are appointed by the existing leaders. The qualifications of deacons are similar

to elders and both men and women can serve in this role. It appears that they may be selected by the congregation upon filling the requirements for the position. The deacons are to look after the physical needs of those requiring assistance and food for example. All believers are to exercise their spiritual gifts for the purpose of building up and edifying one another. Believers are to encourage one-another to love and good deeds and to keep away from sin. The church is to be unified and kept pure. Those that are unrepentant are to be disciplined by being excluded from the fellowship until they have repented. The location for meeting is not important; whatever location is suitable is acceptable.

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