

A Biblical Challenge To Current Unbiblical Church Practices¹

I have several papers, one booklet and one unpublished large book devoted to this matter, but here I want to try to compress my beliefs as to what a Biblical church is and why leaders must urgently review their position. Sincere folk defend the unbiblical status quo by saying that there will never be a perfect church. However, we believers will never be perfect but we are repeatedly charged to be perfect by our heavenly Father.² We must ardently strive for perfection even if we fall far short. Are we not to seek perfection, to be utterly Biblical, in church matters also? The Lord says we should be perfect in church matters; the church at Sardis was rebuked for not being perfect (Rev 3:2). We have no right to expect God's blessing on our meetings if we deliberately set aside God's principles of gathering, despite knowing them.

This paper seeks to demonstrate what these principles are in a concise way. I am not concentrating on polished style here, my purpose is to share information. Hopefully this will be a useful store of data for leaders and Bible students, but in a more compressed form than my two books on the subject.

Meetings

NT churches did not have dedicated buildings

THERE IS NO NT EXAMPLE OF A CHURCH BUILDING; there is no apologetic for such a thing and to build one goes against both the spirit and the specific word of scripture. Material temples belong to the Old Covenant; under the New Covenant God dwells in his people (1 Thess 1:1) not in temples made by hands (Acts 7:48, 17:24).

THE CHURCH IS A BODY OF PEOPLE SEPARATED FROM THE WORLD - THE BODY OF CHRIST: **He is the head of the body, the church ... His body which is the church** (Col 1:18, 24). **The church, which is His body** (Eph 1:22-23). The word used is **evkklhsi,a** [*ekklesia*] which a Greek civic word originally meaning a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly of the people convened at the public place for civic purposes. The church is a 'called out' gathering of people. *Ekklesia* is never applied to a building and does not require a specific building to function.

NT CHURCH MEETINGS TAKE PLACE IN HOUSES³ and the whole ethos of church life is based upon the concept of family (1 Tim 3:15), not ritual or formality; the church is a living organism not an organisation. Further, NT church meetings are always small, there is not a single instance of a normal church meeting occurring in a large hired hall or being large in numbers.⁴ The normal place for church meetings was an upper room in a reasonably sized domestic dwelling.⁵

¹ This paper is reworked from selected parts of other articles, such as *A Friendly Criticism of some Presuppositions of Reformed Theology; Current theological problems explained simply; Unpopular Truths.*

² Matt 5:48; Rm 12:2; Eph 4:13; Col 1:28, 4:12; 1 Thess 3:10; Jm 1:4; 1 Pt 5:10; 1 Jn 4:18.

³ For example: Acts 8:3, 20:8; Rm 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 1:2.

⁴ The hiring of the Hall of Tyrannus by Paul (Acts 19:9) was specifically for evangelism and debate, not for an edification meeting of the church. In Acts 1:13-15, the upper room did not contain 120 people; this is logistically unlikely in modest lodgings. This was the number of all the current disciples in Jerusalem at that time.

⁵ Lk 22:12; Acts 1:13; 20:8.

THE CHURCH IS A FAMILY: The dynamic of the gathered church is *koinonia* (fellowship) where mutual edification can occur (see later); this necessitates fairly small meetings. The character of the church assembled is that of a family; meetings are where the family gathers together and family life is the best symbol of the interdependency God expects to find in churches (Eph 2:19, 3:15; 1 Tim 3:15; Gal 6:10). Homes are the best places for this type of relationship to be carried out. Church is a place where ministers act like fathers (1 Thess 2:11; 1 Cor 4:15), or nursing mothers (1 Thess 2:7); where disciples are like children (1 Jn 2:1; 1 Thess 2:11; Gal 4:19) and where all are in a love relationship (1 Pt 3:8) as brothers and sisters (1 Tim 5:1-2).

The craving for buildings is fleshly pragmatism - men want large congregations. Yet how many conservative UK churches have only a handful of members who struggle to pour all their money into keeping the meeting place infrastructure going? Did not the Lord direct us to use our money for the welfare of the saints and to release ministry? Is this not why God's plan and Paul's pattern was to establish house churches that cost nothing? Why do men purchase buildings to hold large numbers that they then have problems pastoring because there are too many for the leadership team and where group dynamics fail?

The NT pattern is small, home-based meetings where family is the overriding model for fellowship. The church is called a family and God's household, and meeting in homes is exactly what God intended to support this pattern. The church is never depicted as a building, an organisation or a formal institution, it is always seen as a community of mutually encouraging members of one another.

Leadership

NT Churches are not led by a single pastor

Most church leadership is based upon a senior (preaching) pastor. Indeed, the pastor is usually the focus of the church instead of the Lord Jesus; everything revolves around him. Below him are various structures in evangelicalism. Some churches have no one else; some have a few elders who do very little or preach occasionally (in reality they act like a locum when the pastor is away); others have deacons acting unbiblically as spiritual leaders. Usually the pastor is trained in a denominational seminary and almost always is imported from a distant place with no background in the church or the local community.

All of this is wrong - all of it. There is no Biblical evidence for a senior pastor but much evidence for shared, equal leadership committed to elders. Deacons do not govern but assist the elders in administrative matters, especially regarding helping the needy. There is silence on the subject of senior pastors, professional ministry, leaders foreign to the community and the rule of one man.

ELDERS 'GOVERNED' (I.E. FUNCTIONED) IN PLURALITY AND PARITY. There was always more than one elder⁶ and no one was senior in authority; all elders were equal.⁷ This rule was specifically to avoid anyone dominating the flock, which is condemned. Elders

⁶ Churches are to appoint elders, not an elder. Note the plural form in Acts 20:17 (Ephesus) 21:18 (Jerusalem); Titus 1:5 (Crete).

⁷ The 'double honour' of 1 Tim 5:17 could refer to a financial portion as Isa 61:7, an honorarium of honour and remuneration (hence 'double') or merely to higher esteem. There is no implication of greater authority.

(shepherds/pastors/bishops⁸) are repeatedly warned not to have an authoritarian attitude over the flock (1 Pt 5:2-3, 2 Cor 1:24); and the Biblical command to have a plural, equal leadership team is to help prevent such a disaster. There is no such an animal as a 'senior pastor' or a 'minister', let alone 'reverend', 'priest' or 'moderator' and we should never call leaders by special names. We are specifically told by Jesus to avoid giving special titles to church leaders.⁹ Focusing ministry on one man distracts attention from the fact that all are called to be ministers, all are priests.

The concept of a single church leader is a fleshly, worldly management technique and not a divine command. Single leaders may be effective in secular government to drive down a strategy without opposition, but the world is not the model for the kingdom. Churches are led by a team ministry devoted to the interests of the people. There is not one indication in the NT that local churches are led by a monarchical leader or have any formal oversight above them from a wider area. This practice slowly developed after the apostles died out.¹⁰

Leadership names describe function not status

The names include:

- *Elder* (meaning literally what it says – an older, mature man) or *bishop* (meaning overseer). The terms 'bishop' and 'elder' were synonymous - Acts 20:17 with 20:28 and Titus 1:5-7. 'Elder' (*presbuteros*) was derived from the Jewish concept of leadership while 'bishop' (*epoiskopos*) was a Greek term; both imply guardianship. As the apostles travelled, natural Jewish concepts were transmitted into Greek idioms.
- *Shepherd*, the literal meaning of 'pastor'. (*Poimen* – to tend, nourish and safeguard a flock, Eph 4:11, 1 Pt 5:2).
- *Leaders* or men 'over you' (*hegeomai* - to lead, go before, rule, be in command; Heb 13:7, 17. 24). Or 'those that rule' (*proistemi* - to set before or over; to superintend, to protect as a guardian; i.e. those who stand before = the elders; 1 Thess 5:12, 1 Tim 5:17. Compare 1 Tim 3:5 where the rule of a father in the household is called *proistemi*).
- An elder is all these things: he is an overseer, a shepherd, a pastor-teacher, the one over the flock, the one that rules, the one that goes before (in the sense of shepherd leading to pasture not in the sense of a king set over people).
- They were not called 'Doctor', 'the minister', 'the senior pastor', 'reverend' since Jesus commanded thus: **do not be called 'Rabbi'**; [i.e. any term implying authority status and respect] for **One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren** (Matt 23:8).

The leadership team requires all the ascension gifts

And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, (EPH 4:11).

Within the NT church there needed to be the functions of apostle for any sending ministry (pioneer church planting); the evangelist to focus mission; prophetic input to bring God's word and direction (remember that the Bible was in nobody's hand at this time); and the

⁸ The terms elder and bishop are synonymous: Titus 1:5 with 1:7; Acts 20:17 with 20:28 (*episkopos* 'overseer' = 'bishop'). Jews favoured the term 'elder', which was part of their culture and synagogue structure; Greeks preferred the term 'overseer'. The function of elders is to shepherd ('pastor') and to teach (Eph 4:11). Shepherding is a description of what elders do - they care for the flock. The key tasks of a shepherd are to feed the sheep and defend them from predators. Both are crucial.

⁹ Matt 23:8-10

¹⁰ The key people associated with the development of monarchical bishops and the clergy/laity split (Episcopaliamism) are **Ignatius of Antioch** (d. 108), who saw it as constituting a visible centre of church unity; **Irenaeus** (b. 130), who saw bishops as the depository of apostolic tradition; and **Cyprian** (b. 200), with whom the bishop became the absolute vice-regent of Christ, supreme over church members and other officers.

elders needed to be pastor-teachers. This statement of purpose has not been rescinded, even though we now have a Bible. Prophetic ministry is not now primarily revelatory but encouragement from the word (1 Cor 14:3). For the Puritans, prophecy was powerful, spirit-filled Biblical preaching; or 'logic on fire'. An old-fashioned word once used to describe this is 'unction' (which meant 'anointed' by the Spirit).

All modern churches need these ministries today. They need an apostle at the beginning (a missionary) to establish the work. This ministry is also required when the church plants pioneer works. A prophet is a person who serves the church in spiritual encouragement. This may be in the preaching/teaching, or it may be in shorter edifying words of exhortation/encouragement.¹¹ The evangelist is gifted to teach and lead people into witnessing and is successful in this endeavour himself. He is a catalyst to engender evangelism in the body. Pastoring is shepherding - normal eldership care; while teaching is didactic, sustained, doctrinal and expository preaching to impart truth systematically. This is different to prophetic ministry, which is more inspirational and encouraging.

Plural eldership should contain these functions in the local church. Though these ministries are not authoritarian inter-church overseers (as in the false apostolic teams of UK Charismatic Restorationism), they may enter into itinerant ministry to help other churches not fully developed. Itinerant ministries require full-time workers; local churches rarely need full-time people if there are sufficient elders and body ministry. However, THE NT NEVER IMPLIES PAYMENT OF MINISTER BY A REGULAR SALARY, which removes the element of faith from the worker and puts him under the control of the holder of the purse strings.

The main function of church leaders is to identify and release fresh ministry

[Leadership is] for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:12-13).

This is the key to leadership; elders have no self-serving purpose, they function only to help others grow and learn how to serve the body. The prime function of leaders is not to control or manage or even to keep the work going; but to identify, nurture and release the gifts of others. This is so simple and obvious in the NT and yet so few church leaders understand that this is their main task.

Leaders serve

But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.' (Matt 20:25-28)

The whole point of the Gospel is that God sent his Son to serve and save rebels. In doing so the Son expects his brethren to serve each other likewise. He even took a towel and washed the disciple's feet to emphasise this point graphically.

¹¹ In times of severe need, the Lord may raise up seers, people with prophetic prescience. Such a case, in Reformed circles, was Alexander Peden ('Peden the prophet'). Such knowledge was necessary for him to survive in the Scottish Covenanting killing times. He manifested continual accurate prophecies similar to OT prophets. Pioneer missionaries isolated from civilisation have experienced similar powerful gifts.

The first are last and the first serve. Elders are those who are 'first' in the church,¹² so they must serve others too. There is no despotic authority in the church, there is no man above all. In fact, the strongest word for ruling authority in the NT is actually used of the mother managing the household and this word is the source of our word 'despot' (meaning 'dictator' or 'absolute ruler').¹³ God never used such a word for church officers.

Elders serve the body to ensure good order and this sometimes entails rebuke and admonishment. Teaching carries authority and elders who teach carry teaching authority - members should listen, learn and obey - but others teach also. The gift carries the weight. When the gift is seen emerging, elders must encourage the man - this is how fresh leadership arises.

The model for leadership is fatherhood not monarchy or management; ruling is by persuasion not control

We exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children. (1 Thess 2:11)

As my beloved children I warn *you*. (1 Cor 4:14)

For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. (1 Cor 4:15-16)

As a son with *his* father he served with me in the gospel. (Phil 2:22)

Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort *him* as a father. (1 Tim 5:1)

The point is that as the church is a family; the model for leadership is that of a father (or sometimes the even gentler 'nursing mother' - 1 Thess 2:7). Leadership is a relationship of gentleness, care and sacrificial concern. The church is not an organisation but God's household (Eph 2:19); consequently the dynamics of discipline and government are nothing like secular, worldly methods.

While leaders do govern, this government is like fatherly direction more than management. Even the Biblical words that suggest submission to elders need careful attention. For instance Heb 13:17, **Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.** Here the word 'obey' is *peitho* which means 'to persuade', 'to be persuaded', 'to induce by one's words to believe' or 'to win favour'. 'Submit' is not the normal *hupatasso* (organisational submission, e.g. to governments) but *hupeiko* which implies yielding after a battle, such as a discussion. These words suggest leadership is by teaching, discussion, dialogue, convincing and persuasion rather than authoritative commands. Or 1 Timothy 5:17, **Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine;** here *rule* means 'to set before' i.e. to superintend as a protector or a guardian, as a father stands first in the house. It means protective leadership that gives care and aid.

Leaders must be approachable, available, amenable, sociable, loving, restrained, and all these qualities require that the numbers leaders care for are small and local.¹⁴ For instance,

¹² Even the word 'to rule' (*proistemi*, to be first or to stand before thus to lead) used in 1 Thess 5:17 can mean: to attend, be concerned about, give aid or care e.g: Rm 12:8; Titus 3:8,14. Phoebe is nominated by this term which is usually translated 'helper'.

¹³ *Oikodespoteo* in 1 Tim 5:14. It means literally: *master of the house*.

¹⁴ Yes leaders must sometimes rebuke and admonish (but so do other believers), and yes they must enforce discipline when required, (even expelling unrepentant sinners) but these are extreme measures. Under normal circumstances their role is one of gentle nurturing - like a father.

the concept of a pastor living a long distance from his flock is nonsense; Jewish shepherds slept in the sheepfold with the flock making their own bodies the gate.

These scriptures also show the importance of apprenticeship in discipling; the younger worker learns from the experience of the gifted apostle, rather than just gaining head-knowledge.

Though other idioms are sometimes used for the church¹⁵ these are to emphasise certain spiritual facets.¹⁶ Underneath all these symbolic pictures, the reality of the church is that it is actually placed in Christ, and Christ is God's Son. So God is a Father to every believer and thus the church is truly God's family. Within this framework leaders act as fathers only as representatives of our heavenly Father who cares for us as his children. Woe betide any elder that usurps this role with dominating ideas.

This is important! Any church leader who 'lords it' over the flock will face severe judgment. Anyone who abuses God's own people will certainly receive great condemnation.

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler [lit. administrator¹⁷] over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed *is* that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat *his* fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him* and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth [i.e. in hell]. (Matt 24:45-51)

NT local church leadership is never imported

All NT churches grew their own leaders, who were then formally appointed by an apostle (or his delegate) on a return journey, sometimes only a few months after the Gospel was first announced.

I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

When they had appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23).

This required faith on the part of the apostle and not human logistics. After planting a church, the apostle established a doctrinal foundation and then left, or sometimes he sent a delegate (like Timothy or Titus) to help nurture it further. As certain men began to show an aptitude in understanding the word, they were nurtured and released into formal ministry.

NT leaders always arose out of the local body; it never imported elders from somewhere else.

Church ministry was never formally trained

The apostolic church established no seminaries and no formal leadership qualifications. Jesus chose disciples that were largely unlearned simple folk; some were educated but none were religiously trained. Simple men like Peter were transformed into effective leaders. Paul was later chosen as an apostle who was formally trained as a Pharisee, but he

¹⁵ Such as: temple, army, people, nation, flock, vine etc.

¹⁶ For instance: Temple - where God's worship is focused on Earth; Holy Nation - who God's people are rather than others; Army - the focus of heavenly warfare etc.

¹⁷ **kaqi,sthmi** *kathistemi*, Strong's 2525; meaning: to set, place, to set one over a thing (in charge of it), to appoint one to administer an office.

specifically states that he counted this training as rubbish (Phil 3:7-8). There is no professional training of leaders in the NT, rather all leadership training was on the job in the body or learned as a co-worker to an apostle.

The overwhelming emphasis commanded by Jesus is to trust in the Holy Spirit to guide into all truth (Jn 16:13). Over and over we are exhorted to walk in the Spirit and be filled with the Spirit in order to function as believers. Yet modern churches tend to ignore this urgent qualification and substitute another one - seminary training. One reason for this is to ensure that new leaders toe the party line.

Biblical training is by apprenticeship, where a young disciple works and travels with the experienced, gifted man, as Timothy to Paul. This was the method established by Jesus, where his disciples learned everything from first-hand experience. Thus the gifted man passes on his character as well as his knowledge; his prayer habits and faith, as well as wisdom. Academic training can never match this Biblical method.

NT church leadership is only male

Apostolic commands on the qualifications of leaders are always applied solely to men.¹⁸ This was familiar to Jewish believers since synagogues only had male leaders, and the synagogue was the early pattern for the home-church. We only need one word of warning that women are not to be trusted with church leadership authority, but we have several.¹⁹ Where the modern church has succumbed to the spirit of the age and feminist pressures by appointing female leaders, such as the Anglican Church or the Charismatic New Churches, it should be condemned as heretical.

Mutual ministry

Cessationism vs. the use of spiritual gifts

The NT church used spiritual gifts. This cannot be denied from the Bible, but many good folk would deny that any supernatural gifts are available today. This notion is called 'Cessationism', that is the doctrine that the supernatural spiritual gifts of the NT ceased to be manifest when the Bible was written, say by the end of the first century AD.

Cessationism is largely a defence against the aberrations found in Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations; indeed, the doctrine arose at the time of the Pentecostal beginnings. The serious errors of charismatic churches must be condemned but the arguments to defend cessationism are flawed. It is not possible to make an exegetical case for this idea; all attempts are strained and stretched beyond logic. It is also not possible to make a historical case.

The key argument is that the sign gifts were only available until the time that the canon of scripture was complete and churches then had the use of Bibles, thus not requiring prophetic ministry, words of knowledge etc. The problems are:

- There is not a shred of evidenced for this idea in scripture. There is no clear statement that the supernatural gifts have ceased; indeed, this concept would have shocked the early church that relied upon them.
- Attempts to force this notion into 1 Cor 13:8-10 are arbitrary and unsound. 'Perfect' here clearly refers to the restoration of all things at the Second Coming.

¹⁸ Such as 1 Tim 2:12, 3:2.

¹⁹ Gen 3:16; 1 Cor 11:5, 14:34, 35; 1 Tim 2:11, 12; Rev 2:20.

- Usually the sign gifts are said to end around the time of the final NT book about 95AD. Yet accredited church historians and early church fathers affirm that some genuine gifts continued well past that time, perhaps until the 3rd century.
- Others suggest a date when the canon was formally accepted at the Council of Carthage in 397AD. But before this time there were insufficient revelatory gifts in practice, (though it seems that healings continued according to Augustine) so it would mean that God left the church without revelation for about 200 years.
- In any case, even after 397 there would have been very few people with a Bible. Hand-written scrolls of even a few books would have been unavailable except for rich people. This situation is far from 'perfect'; it was centuries before ordinary church members were able to read even the NT in most countries. The first vernacular translations into German appeared with Luther's Bible in 1534 while the first English translations that were widely available did not appear until at least 1535 with the publication of Tyndale's complete Bible (the NT appeared in 1525).²⁰ Thus the whole Bible was not available to most English Christians for over 1500 years (even then few poor people could afford one if they could find one²¹). Why would God withdraw gifts that the apostle's felt were essential to edification, only to leave them without access to his word for 1500 years? [This is one reason why this period was called the 'Dark Ages'.]
- The Bible itself demands that we do not deny spiritual gifts: **Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies.** (1 Thess 5:19-20); **Earnestly desire the best gifts** (1 Cor 12:31, 38), **Desire spiritual gifts and especially that you may prophesy.** (1 Cor 14:1); and that normal meetings would include them, **Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. ... Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.** (1 Cor 14:26, 29); **Having gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith.** (Rm 12:6). In fact, there is no clear line drawn in the NT between ordinary and supernatural spiritual gifts; 1 Cor 12:29-30 joins helps and administration with healing and miracles; Rm 12:6-8 contains encouraging and giving with prophecy, Eph 4:11 contains teachers as well as apostles).

For these and many other reasons we cannot deny the use of spiritual gifts in genuine churches. All the gifts that the Spirit gives to the body are necessary and should be used with decency and order in love.

However, the gift of tongues has ceased. In practice they disappeared before the end of the first century except in aberrant groups such as the Montanists. The word for tongues 'ceasing' in 1 Cor 13:8 is different from the other two gifts mentioned and refers to tongues ceasing on their own before the others. Thus when they ceased, they were never to return. This is because they were not necessary as they were a judgmental sign to Israel when the New Covenant church and apostolic ministry began. [See my paper on tongues explaining all this.]

This is all under God's sovereignty and we may actually see few of these gifts. However, in times of need such gifts tend to emerge as God encourages his beleaguered people. We must not try to artificially manufacture these gifts or copy erroneous Charismatic techniques that frequently have an occult provenance. However, if we are to obey scripture, we cannot rule them out under some rational apologetic.

²⁰ Wycliffe's Bible appeared in 1388 but very few people had access to it and printing had not yet been invented.

²¹ Over 200 years later the poor Welsh girl Mary Jones had to save from months and then walk barefoot to Bala, 26 miles from her home in Wales, to get a Bible.

NT Churches function on the basis of mutual edification

Surprisingly, the apostles never state that worship is the reason for gathering together, but they do insist that the corporate church is a place of mutual edification. Personal worship is taken as read, but the purpose of gathering is to edify one another.

THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH WAS TO EDIFY ONE ANOTHER. Members are interdependent and function to encourage one another in all things, to inspire one another to become more godly. Meetings are, thus, places for mutual edification, **Therefore let us pursue the things which *make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Rm 14:19).** Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Cor 14:26).

Meetings are to be places where all share so that every gift of Christ is manifest and all benefit. The point of gathering is that mutual edification takes place. Meetings that are dominated and controlled by one man are not Biblical church meetings at all but represent the opposite of Biblical assembling.

- Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. (Rm 15:2)
- Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. (Eph 4:29)
- I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets that the church may receive edification. (1 Cor 14:5)
- Let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. (1 Cor 14:12)
- Love edifies. (1 Cor 8:1)
- Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (Rm 14:19)
- Comfort each other and edify one another. (1 Thess 5:11)

Edify means 'to build up', like the building up a house (from which the word derives), and thus involves the concepts of construction, laying a foundation, strengthening, encouragement, promoting growth, development. We teach and encourage one another bit by bit, just as bricks are laid one upon another very slowly until a house is formed.

The reason for the multiple command to edify one another is that God has gifted every member of the body of Christ in a certain way²² and by sharing these gifts of grace we build each other up. Some may have many gifts, some may have more powerful gifts, but all have something of Christ that only they can express. The body needs to receive and benefit from these gifts in order to grow.

Indeed, the only way people (and the church) grow is when all the body works together interdependently: ... **speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.** (Eph 4:15-16). Without the expression of these gifts, there is no growth.

The clearest picture of a NT meeting is 1 Corinthians 14 and in this chapter alone the word 'edify' (and its cognates) is mentioned 7 times. Here Paul exhorts believers to share their

²² Eph 3:7, 4:7; 2 Tim 1:6; 1 Pt 4:10, As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

gifts for the good of all, that everyone may be exhorted, encouraged, edified and comforted (1 Cor 14:3).²³ Christian meetings are not about grandstanding performances, showy expressions or fleshly exhibitions of talent; neither are they preaching centres - no matter how good the preacher is. Christian meetings are about ordinary folk sharing what they have of Christ with a mind to do each other good. Edification is *koinonia* in action.

A crucial aspect of *koinonia* is that the Holy Spirit sovereignly gives gifts to the church to ensure spiritual development (read 1 Cor 12 carefully). The Spirit gifts individuals in the body using ordinary folk to edify others in the assembly and serve the community: **But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given ... through the Spirit ...** (1 Cor 12:7-8). The expression of the Spirit is not solely given to one man, but to all.

There is silence regarding the modern format of a formal church sermon dominating a church meeting.

Early church meetings were not preaching centres but places of body ministry. This is not to minimise the importance of teaching. Instruction is so important that it requires a didactic presentation (such as a sermon, exhortation or seminar), followed by questions, answers and discussion. Consequently, thorough teaching is perhaps best reserved for a weeknight meeting where discussion can continue in relaxed surroundings over tea.

The idea of a man dominating a meeting by a sermon, in an almost entertaining way, was Greek, not Biblical, at the time NT writing. Popular entertainment was to see a respected orator giving a homily or displaying rhetoric skills.

Sermons are effective means of passing simple ideas on to crowds of people (such as the Sermon on the Mount); but the Lord saved detailed instruction to informal times with his disciples where they could ask him questions. Paul did the same. His sermons are evangelistic outreaches to the public; while in churches Paul shared more in discussion in homes (Acts 20:11, 20, 31).

Very often the word translated as 'preached' is actually a word meaning 'dialogue'. For instance in Acts 20:7, 'preached (in KJV) is *dialegomai* which means discussion, conversation or argument.²⁴ The meeting in Troas was a directed discussion with questions and answers. The English word 'preach' is used to translate about 30 different Greek words regarding the proclamation of God's word. Those that specifically mean proclamation or preaching are describing the evangelisation of outsiders. When Paul spoke to churches and brethren, words such as argument, conversation and persuasion are used which suggest interaction and dialogue.

There is no clear model for the way sermons dominate modern church meetings in either the OT or the NT (as dominating 35-50% of the church's worship), and this format did not arise in church history for about 200 years after the apostles died out. Sermons are not common in the OT and usually appear at times of crisis; but even then they sometimes included active participation (Isa 5:3ff; Amos 3:3-8). In any case, we have little information about the presentation, length and style of apostolic preaching (speeches are often edited in the text) in order to defend the current practice.

²³ The arbitrary exegesis of this passage to teach the opposite, that Paul is condemning the Corinthians for allowing body ministry, is distorted, strange and a shocking attempt to clutch at straws. See my paper, *1 Cor 14:26, A Rebuttal of a Novel Exegesis*.

²⁴ **dialegomai** Strong's 1256; meaning: to think different things with one's self, mingle thought with thought, to ponder, to converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss.

Nothing in the writing of the sub-apostolic church fathers suggest that a regular sermon was the usual means of teaching in church meetings. Gradually, as Christian leaders emerged who were earlier trained in rhetoric, sermons began to appear regularly. Even when sermons were well established by the 3rd century, they still contained interruptions, interactivity and feedback. The sermon developed as the normal means of teaching at the same time as other worldly influences began to dominate the church and mutual ministries diminished.²⁵

Finally, throughout history, great preachers have lamented that the sermonic form produced poor effects in believers. Church fathers²⁶ and more modern theologians²⁷ have stated the method is ineffective and that perhaps only 2-4% is ever remembered.

I am not suggesting that sermons be abandoned, but that they should not dominate the Sunday meeting of the gathered community; instead solid teaching should have more time in another meeting. The teacher will use whatever means God inspires. This may include sermons, but also personal example of character, private visitation and tutoring, group discussions with questions and answers and meetings given over entirely to Bible study. Sermons are primarily for the proclamation of the Gospel to outsiders.

The NT emphasis in church life is ‘one-anothering’ (*koinonia*), not top down authority.

The phrase ‘one another’ is used over 60 times by the apostles to emphasise mutual, interdependent ministry. Growth in the Christian life is by God’s grace, but God has purposed that this grace is usually mediated through *koinonia*, so that we are dependent upon each other (Eph 4:29). As we encourage one another we all partake more of God’s grace. This is why apostolic commands are frequently found in the form of the ‘one another’ phrase, for example:

- Be kindly affectionate to one another. (Rm 12:10)
- Admonish one another. (Rm 15:14)
- Through love serve one another. (Gal 5:13)
- Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another. (Col 3:13)
- Comfort one another. (1 Thess 4:18)

The modern concept of top-down authority, of pastors being six feet above contradiction is entirely absent from the NT.

Ministering to each other involves mutual admonishment and submission

At a certain point every believer should be able to teach and admonish others (Heb 5:12); it is not just elders who admonish, all can admonish:

- ... submitting to one another in the fear of God. (Eph 5:21) [The fact that Paul subsequently highlights the family and slaves does not limit the ‘one another’ to just these groups.]
- I urge you, brethren - you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and *that* they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints - that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labours with *us*. (1 Cor 16:15-16) [There is no indication that Stephanus was an elder, though he may well have been, but note also that the submission was to his household. As hosts of the church, the members were to submit to his wife and family.]

²⁵ The down grade included: the introduction of instrumental music and choirs; the problem of various heresies; the influx of Gnosticism and mystical practices; the decline of true spiritual gifts; the development of institutional leadership; domination by Rome; the establishment of church buildings - and then icons, altars, and decorations; and worldly acceptance by the Roman emperor causing an influx of superficial trendy ‘believers’.

²⁶ E.g. Clement of Alexandria; see B J Kidd, *Hist. of the church to AD461*, 1922, I, 405.

²⁷ E.g. RL Dabney.

- Yes, all of *you* be submissive to one another. (1 Pt 5:5)
- Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another. (Rm 15:14)
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another. (Col 3:16)
- Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly. (1 Thess 5:14; note; *brethren*, not the elders who are told to do this in v12)
- the older women likewise ... that they admonish the young women (Titus 2:3-4)

Again it is the gift that carries authority. If a brother has wisdom he can apply that in admonishment to another brother without the involvement of the elders. If more godly believers admonished folk, there would be fewer problems in the church. In one sense there was no higher authority in the early church than the apostles, and Peter was the acknowledged early leader (James became the leading brother at Jerusalem later). Despite this, the upstart and former persecutor, Paul, admonished Peter publicly - and he was right to do so. (Gal 2:11ff).

We are to act in love towards each other always, but that does not mean that there are actual visible acts of love being manifest. Love may pervade a relationship while there are no visible signs (such as hugs or kisses). Similarly, submission must also be a heart attitude we maintain towards each other; but that doesn't necessarily mean there are any obvious visible signs of it - such as obedience to a command. Even a pastor addressing the flock, or admonishing the flock, may still have an attitude of submission to the flock in terms of preferring others above himself.

The reason is that we are all members of Christ's body and all equal in status:

- There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)
- There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all. Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another. (Col 3:11-13)

Together we stand as one new man. The local church is to represent this one new man; as such there can be no elevated people; all are loving and submissive to all. There is no seniority above others in the body of Christ, all are one in status. There are different functions in the body and elders stand in front like fathers in order to ensure decency and order; BUT IMPORTANT DECISIONS ARE TO BE ARRIVED AT BY CONSENSUS (see Acts 15:22-23, 25).

The place of women in ministry

The pendulum tends to swing wildly regarding this matter in history. At one point women are prohibited from doing or saying anything, at another they are promoted to lead churches. Both extremes are wrong.

There are some complex arguments surrounding this matter which cannot be examined here. For more information see my paper, *Is There A Biblical Limit On The Ministry Of Women?* I will limit myself to simple points.

1. WOMEN CANNOT LEAD CHURCHES OR MEETINGS. There are strict prohibitions on this and a huge history of Biblical, historical precedent. The reason Paul gives for this goes back to the Fall (1 Tim 2:13-14). When Israel was dominated by queens it was a sign of judgment and many abuses followed. There are no examples of NT female apostles (despite arguments to the contrary) or elders. The only mention of a powerful woman

leader is one condemned to judgment (Rev 2:2off).

2. **WOMEN CANNOT TEACH OR HAVE ANY MINISTRY OF AUTHORITY OVER MEN. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.** (1 Tim 2:12) This is simple and clear, no amount of sophistry can overturn it.
3. **WOMEN CAN PARTICIPATE IN NORMAL WAYS THAT CARRY NO AUTHORITY. You can all prophesy one by one.** (1 Cor 14:31). **Whenever you come together, each of you has ...** (1 Cor 14:26). **I wish you all spoke with tongues** (1 Cor 14:5). **[Philip] had four virgin daughters who prophesied** (Acts 21:9). **Every woman who prays or prophesies** (1 Cor 11:5).
4. **THERE ARE SOME LIMITATIONS TO THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MEETINGS. Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.** (1 Cor 14:34-35) [See also **Let a woman learn in silence with all submission** (1 Tim 2:11).] Without entering into detailed exegesis here, Paul's point in context is the weighing of prophecy given by men. Women are not allowed to participate in the way that men do, such as evaluating or disregarding prophecy since this involves authority. Neither are they to disrupt a meeting by asking questions that distract the meeting when they could better ask their husbands at home. The emphasis on women's contributions is submission.
5. **WOMEN SHOW THEIR SUBMISSION TO GOD AND THE ORDER IN CHURCH BY WEARING A HEAD COVERING.** I know this is controversial and unpopular, but it is the clear teaching of Paul and has nothing at all to do with Corinthian culture. **Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonours his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with *her* head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ... the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on *her* head, because of the angels. ... Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ... But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God.** (1 Cor 11:4-16)
 - Simply note that Paul uses universal arguments not local ones (creation, divine order and function).
 - He says it is shameful if she prays uncovered. Women must obey this instruction or live in shame at church.
 - The covering is a sign that she is under man's authority, obeying God's principles, in submission. The covering is not her hair, a woman doesn't 'wear' her hair; a covering is something put on the body.
 - It is a command to not offend angels looking on God's testimony -i.e. universal to all churches at all times.
 - To seal the matter, Paul states that all the churches he works with obey this rule, not just Corinth. The cultural argument to ignore this instruction is a scandalous fudge to avoid clear teaching. We could make an equal argument on cultural grounds to not baptise anyone, but no one would dare do such a thing.

Church membership

The modern practice to segregate believers into an inner and outer core is unloving and unbiblical. There is not a shred of evidence to suggest that after a period of attendance, Christians should make some kind of commitment, often written, and then 'become' church members having voting rights and able to become officers.

God's word is that

For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:13)

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor

1:9)

We are all members of one another (Rm 12:5; Eph 4:25). To segregate believers is deeply offensive to God, who told us to receive one another (Rm 15:7) and not to prefer one before another (1 Tim 5:21). In the NT we never read of being members of a church but being members of one another. Neither does the NT speak of 'joining' a church because we are already united in Christ.²⁸ Rather it says that we should **keep** (guard, attend to carefully, maintain) the [existing] unity of the Spirit, not establish it (Eph 4:3). If Christians are received by God when they are converted, they should be received by any church. It is he who fitly framed us together, and the church needs no man or group to authorise his choice.

Worship

NT Church worship did not use musical instruments

Search as long as you like, you will find no reference to musical instruments in connection with the church in the New Testament, and precious little mention of any kind. Again the church followed the synagogue in this - there was no instrumental music in the synagogue. Historically, instruments only began to be used in church services after about 200 years²⁹ when other pagan influences began to be absorbed. As they appeared they were condemned by leaders such as Chrysostom as a fleshly development. Instrumental music was formally introduced into Roman church services by Pope Vitelian in 671 AD.

Worship is a reverential attitude of the heart and a submission of life to God (Rm 12:1-2). In Patriarchal times music was not necessary for true worship (Heb 11:21). Even under the Mosaic Law worship could be expressed in awful circumstances without music (2 Sam 12:20). The sacrifice of praise can even be a description of financial giving to the needy (Phil 4:18). Instrumental music is not mentioned in connection with the church in the NT at all. Indeed, music is only mentioned as a feature in connection with the judgment of Babylon (Rev 18:22).³⁰ The whole point of NT teaching is that the OT types of instrumental music and musicians in the temple are fulfilled in harmony the spiritual songs and virtues of the saints in worship. Worship that is based on instrumental music, especially loud raucous music, accompanied by choirs, is old covenant religion. These types vanished along with the sacrifice of animals and priestly garments.

Scripture emphasises the importance of vocal contributions in worship. The church is called together to offer up spiritual sacrifices (1 Pt 2:5), the fruit of the lips giving thanks (Heb 13:15). Worship is something done in and by saints as a result of a consecrated life yielded in service to God as a sacrifice (Rm 12:1). Praise is the outward testimony of our lives to demonstrate the goodness of God (Eph 1:6,12; Phil 1:11). Both can include sung, vocal contributions.

The new nature of believers, the expression of a new heart, is manifested in a new song unto God. This is acceptable worship since it is inspired by the Spirit and returns to God. The expression of the flesh (clever human ideas, will-worship, uncontrolled emotionalism) is not acceptable to God. The cleverness of musical skill, the emotional intensity of certain types of music, and the sheer force of loud noise works against Christian worship, as does

²⁸ The word *join* ('to glue or stick things together') does appear in connection with the church in Acts 9:26-28 and 5:12-14. This is not used in the formal sense of the church joining people to it, but is a simple verb describing people who wanted or did not want to attach themselves to the brethren.

²⁹ Many have cogently argued that musical instruments were not in widespread use in the church at large for 1200 years.

³⁰ 'Harps' in revelation are indicative of harmonious Christian praise (Rev 14:2, 15:2). There are no material harps in heaven. Interestingly, only the voice/song is recorded as being heard.

anything which excites the soul. The flesh is not to be brought into the service of the church.

Praise to God should involve singing, although singing can be instructive or even admonishment to brethren;³¹ but the NT model is that the singing is *a cappella*, not accompanied by instruments.

The centrality of Lord's Supper

Preaching is not the focus of NT church life, breaking of bread is.³² Indeed, celebrating the Lord's Supper frequently is a divine command Matt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:17-19. It is clear apostolic teaching and practise that breaking bread is the reason for churches to assemble. Why do we gather on Sunday? Primarily to share the Lord's Supper and remember the Lord's sacrifice for us.

Apostolic practice was to initially break bread often, sometimes daily, in each other's homes (Acts 2:42,46) and later to break bread as a corporate body on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7); gradually the custom centred on the weekly event 'when you meet together' (1 Cor 11:18, 20).

This ordinance fits easily within a community framework in a home; just like its precursor, the Passover meal, it was a family ritual. Indeed the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper as part of a larger church meal called *the agape feast* where the rich brought food to share with the poor. The context is firmly set within community life, and encourages community as a family together (Acts 2:42). In formal, organised, institutional churches it is far more difficult to maintain such intimacy and the memorial of the Lord's death became a stylised ritual that was a shadow of the original. In modern large churches it is yet harder, so that many celebrate it rarely, or ignore it all together.

The Supper is a means of realising the presence of Jesus and is not just a memorial (1 Cor 10:16; Lk 24:30-31; Acts 10:41; Jn 21:9-14). Indeed, failure to reverence it leads to judgment (1 Cor 11:28-32), so powerful and important is this divine institution. Why would churches not make the most of this by weekly practise? We disobey God by neglecting it.

Sacrificial giving not tithing

True giving is an act of worship. Many churches teach their members that strict tithing is a divine obligation, that Christians need to give 10% of their disposable (some would say gross) income to the Lord's work - and by this they usually mean to their church treasurer. Instead, the emphasis of scripture is that the focus of the believers' financial giving is the poor and needy, not bricks and mortar or church ministries and programs. Neither is the principle of tithing a New Covenant institution.

Giving is absolutely crucial to a genuine Christian testimony. A believer who is not a giver is a loser. The Lord promised that the measure we give is the measure we get. A Christian should be giving in every sense: of his time, of his love, of his care of his money, of his possessions.

Giving is not restricted to tithing. Those teachers who limit giving to tithing are wrong. Indeed, strict tithing lets wealthy people off any sacrificial giving and puts a huge burden

³¹ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord (Col 3:16). Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Eph 5:19).

³² 1 Cor 11:18, 20; Acts 2:42.

on people in poverty who can't make ends meet already. Their argument is that tithing appeared before the Mosaic Law (Gen 14:20) and is therefore not abrogated along with the Mosaic Law. In this argument, circumcision and blood sacrifice ought to continue as well. This fallacious argument is facile.

What God is interested in is sacrificial giving, a spirit of giving, giving that costs. In the OT, the people of the land were required to give the best animals in their herds and flocks to God as an offering. Their best was God's. Bulls and goats were not cheap, unless you were rich. God showed his nature of giving by sending his only begotten Son to die and suffer for the sins of those who were rebels against him. This is sacrificial giving.

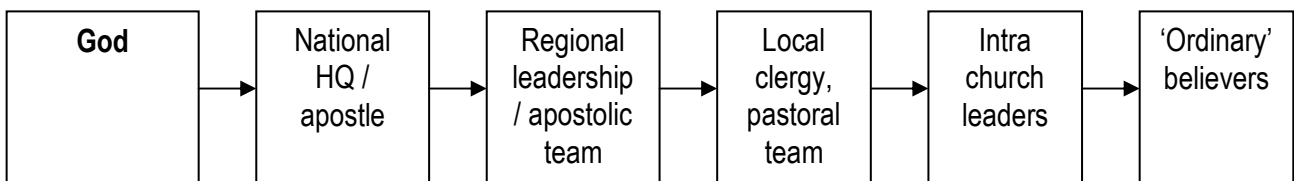
- There is no apostolic command to tithe under the New Covenant. The prime purpose of the OT tithe was to support the priestly class, the Levites who had no land, plus payment for the temple services. In the New Covenant all believers are priests as well as God's temple, there is no formal priestly caste or material temple to support. The OT tithe was also for the poor, and this principle continues. Those who preach the Gospel in full-time service (and there are comparatively few of these in the church population; many elders and even apostles worked) are to be supported (1 Cor 9:14) as the counterpart of Levites (1 Cor 9:13), but this is never said to be a tithe.
- *So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work (2 Cor 9:7-8).* Each one must determine what he is going to give financially, and keep to that as a personal covenant.
- The widow's mite is an example of godly giving, and this cost her everything. Rich people may even be called to give up all their wealth. Jesus demanded this of one man (Mk 10:21), and others in history followed his example (such as CT Studd).
- Everything in our lives is to be considered as being given to us by God and to be used for his service; this includes our wives and children (1 Sam 1:28). Sometimes, it costs us more to sacrifice our time, perhaps much needed leisure time, in order to help those God puts in our way. *He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, and He will pay back what he has given. (Prov 19:17)*
- Christianity is giving. Our lives are to be a sacrifice to God as an act of committed worship and service (Rm 12:1).
- A tithe may be a good starting point for Christians, but this is not a focus. What is important is to listen to what God wants of us in all things.
- *Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you. (Lk 6:38)* He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2 Cor 9:6)

The key modern church error

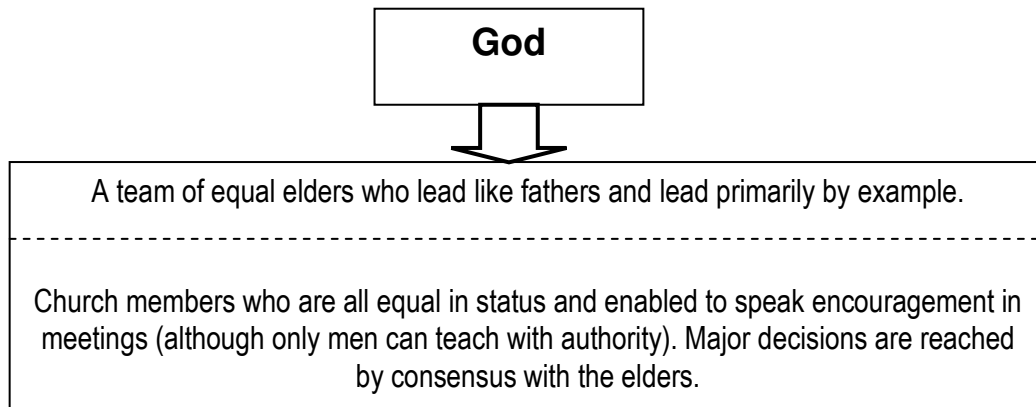
Institutionalism

The vast majority of churches in the world belong to a denomination or are intrinsically institutional bodies. This means that they are highly organised, have formal leadership structures, are interconnected and are usually accountable to a higher body. For instance, the Anglican Church has a pyramidal leadership structure, from the Archbishop at the top through bishops down to priests and other offices. Modern UK Charismatic Churches have many ranks: Apostle, apostolic team members, prophet, area leader, local church senior pastor, the junior pastoral team, congregational leader and house-group leader (or other intra-church leaders).³³ Some churches are even run from a foreign country. Even Baptist churches have various local lay-leaders, deacons, elders, senior-pastors, area moderators and a national HQ.

All of this demonstrates a clergy/laity split; there are the official leaders and there are ordinary church members. Leaders stand at the front and do all the work, and get all the attention; members sit in pews doing little or nothing. God speaks to the leaders, the leaders then interpret this to the membership. This system is not only unbiblical, it is anti-Biblical.



The Biblical model is exceptionally simple; it is:



It is difficult to supply a warning about all the errors of institutionalism since almost every UK church is run this way. There are, sadly, very few churches that meet in homes and function on NT principles.

³³ It is interesting to note that the Charismatic Movement began by condemning denominationalism and tiered ranks of leadership. Yet within ten years such pyramidal structures appeared in many Charismatic groups and within 15 years the New Churches (Restorationism) were dominated by multi-tiered leadership structures. This shows how easy it is for the flesh to take control of churches.

Summary

- NT churches did not have dedicated buildings but met in homes.
- NT Churches are not led by a single pastor.
- Leadership names describe function not status.
- The main function of church leaders is to identify and release fresh ministry
- Leaders serve.
- The model for leadership is fatherhood not monarchy or management.
- Leadership is not authoritarian but teaches through dialogue and persuasion.
- NT local church leadership is never imported.
- Church ministry was never formally trained.
- The church needs all the ascension gifts.
- Important body decisions are reached by consensus.
- NT church leadership is only male.
- NT Churches function on the basis of mutual edification.
- The sermon is not the focus of the church meeting.
- In the NT church spiritual gifts flourished.
- These gifts are still available.
- The NT emphasis in church life is ‘one-anothering’ (*koinonia*), not top down authority.
- Ministering to each other involves mutual admonishment and submission.
- There are restrictions on women’s ministry.
- The practical focus of church life was breaking of bread not the sermon.
- NT Church worship did not use musical instruments.
- Christian giving is sacrificial and not legalistic.

Conclusion

Surely these principles are easy to see in the New Testament. This is not rocket science; the way God wants us to gather and order our communal lives is straightforward. A novice can see the crucial importance of a weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper, for instance. How can leaders everywhere abandon these principles? Why do even good men seek to build bigger buildings for the work instead of planting new churches?

The truth is that one error easily leads to another. Once there is a building then there are demands for money and drawing more people. This needs a focus and a popular preacher is always a draw. This means concentrating upon the sermon and one-man ministry to let the man have free reign. This means no time for breaking bread each week or mutual edification. As numbers grow, the man-focused work seeks a bigger building to house the increased numbers. Members have less and less say in contributions or strategy. Associate leaders get sidelined. Soon empires are being built and ecumenism reigns. This is just one scenario of many; but all the examples have a foundation of being man-based. This is the grievous error of the church today.

Instead the lord expects us to trust him by trusting his people. His purposes are simple but effective. History shows that they work. It’s time for the Lord’s people to put the church back into the Lord’s hands. He will build it his way if man stops meddling.