

Church Structure

By Dr. Greg Wiens

The New Testament is simply not as clear with structure as some would like (Unleashing the Church, Tillapaugh -- chps 5-7). The epistles give examples of church structures as they were practiced in local churches, but even these aren't always consistent. Paul does describe elders and deacons in the epistles to Timothy while he was the pastor at Ephesus. So why aren't these positions even mentioned when Paul writes the letter to the Ephesians? He talks a great deal about structure and positions of leadership in chapter 4. He talks about these being for the 'equipping of the saints'. So where do the elders fit in? He mentions elders a lot in the letter to the pastor (Timothy), but not in the letter to the church? Why not?

As we see in Titus, Paul tells Titus to select elders (notice not elected or even ratified). After Paul planted the church, he appointed Titus as pastor. He then left him there and told him to appoint some leaders to help him in ministry. Obviously, their role was not to lead the church. Paul was the leader. And then there was Titus. I guess the elders would be third in line.

We also see a modified model of the elder rule in Acts 6.1-7. Neither the apostles (12) nor the servers (7) are called official names but have been likened to elders and deacons. But clearly they are not called such and don't even function as described in the Pastoral Epistles. Who was the pastor(s)? Were they all pastors? Did the seven only wait tables?

Over the centuries many have tried to force a fixed model of leadership into the New Testament, but the New Testament simply isn't precise in the area of structure. Those who believe it is read the scriptures with a bias.

I believe (Tillapaugh concurs) the discontinuity of discussion about church structure indicates there was no one structure which was to be the template model for all churches in all cultures and all generations. Rather, there were several evolving models that were similar, but different; as different as the cultures in which these churches were founded. Throughout the centuries, this has continued to be the case. Even whole denominations have been formed based on a certain leadership model (presbytery, episcopal, etc...), I believe the principle is that persons occupying the office of pastor should equip the saints for the work of the ministry. There also must be godly leaders who stand in the gap as the gifted, called and Spirit-led pastors lead the church in bringing about healthy ministry.

A model that works in our culture is the accountability model of leadership. John Kaiser, in his book *Winning on Purpose* describes this model very clearly. While I believe this model works well in our culture, there are other models that are consistent with the principles given. Given the Church of God's congregational polity of the past, the accountability model of leadership accomplishes the goal by providing accountability for the pastor, while freeing him/her up to lead. This model is very consistent with scriptural principles, but it is not the only one.