

The Church and the Restoration Movement (Part 3)

In his Historical Grammar, A T Robertson has the following on *ekklesia*:

In the NT (ekklesia) ... still appears in the sense of “assembly” at times, as in 1 Cor 11:18, but usually as Thayer shows (Lexicon), the idea of the word is that of body or company of believers, whether assembled or not, the body of Christ... The word in the sense of body of Christians is used either in the local (Ac 8:3) or the general sense (Mt 16:18).

In Hamilton and throughout the world, non-denominational churches of Christ make provision for regular worship assemblies patterned after the one alluded to by Robertson (1 Cor 11:18). We explain the scriptural rationale for these gatherings under the heading *What to expect*. For the present, Robertson’s observation that *ekklesia* is used in the local or general sense helps us frame our discussion of church organisation.

Ecclesia – the “general” sense

Robertson points out that Jesus uses *ekklesia* in the general sense when He says, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). By this, he means that the Lord is speaking of the entire body of believers in every place and in every age. The future tense in Matthew 16:18 indicates that the church was not yet in existence when Christ spoke these words, some months before His death, while the use of the possessive pronoun (“my”) alerts us to the fact that ownership of the church belongs to Christ alone. Consistently, Paul later describes our Lord as “head” of the universal church—His body, His bride (Eph 5:23-32; Col 1:18)—and as the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).

But does the universal Church founded by Christ take the form of a hierarchical power structure presided over by an earthly head? Like many others, I once thought so, because I was taught in my catechetical class that, since her establishment, the “one true Church” has been presided over by successive occupants of the “chair of Peter”—the pope. Later in life, I opened the Bible expecting to read about this office, along with the offices of cardinal, archbishop, bishop, priest, and deacon, but I found nothing in Scripture to justify any kind of organizational structure for the church at the universal level. In a word, the New Testament knows nothing of the various councils, synods, committees, or hierarchies which operate above the level of the local church in many denominational groups.

It’s important not to draw unwarranted conclusions from the authoritative role of certain supernaturally gifted individuals in the first-century church. The Lord gave “gifts” to men “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:7-12). These spiritually gifted men included apostles and prophets (Eph 4:12). Earlier in this epistle, Paul describes the church as “the household of God...built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief

cornerstone” (Eph 2:19, 20). These gifted men laid a foundation of supremely authoritative revelation for all God’s people under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, there are no apostles or prophets today (see 'Our Supernatural Gifts Have Ceased'). No individual, committee, body, or synod has possessed such universal authority since the end of the apostolic period. (Lord willing, we will trace departure from the NT pattern elsewhere)

Ecclesia – the local sense

When Paul addresses letters to the "church" at Corinth (1 Cor 1:2), the "churches of Galatia" (Gal 1:2), and the "church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1), he uses the term "church" to refer to a community of Christians in one location. He also has these local communities in mind when he uses expressions such as "churches of Christ" (Rom 16:16) and "churches in Judea." Similarly, Luke mentions "every church" (Acts 14:23), and Jesus refers to "the seven churches" (Rev 1:11). Thus, while Scripture uses the term "church" to speak of the one universal church, it also applies the term to local communities of Christians in different areas, which together make up that universal church.

It is clear that, unlike the universal church, the local church described in the New Testament did possess a formal structure and government. Not long after the establishment of the church in Acts 2, we read of "elders" in the church at Judea (Acts 11:30), and a little later, we learn that Paul "appointed elders...in every church" (Acts 14:23) while in Galatian territory. We read of elders in the churches at Jerusalem (Acts 15:2), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), Philippi (Phil 1:1), and other places (Jas 5:14). Paul left Titus in Crete to "set in order what remains" by appointing elders in every city (Tit 1:5). Elsewhere, we discuss the role of men and women in the church and argue from Scripture that leadership in the church is male.

Elders are to "shepherd" and "guard" the "flock" (1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28) and to "take care of the church of God" (1 Tim 3:5). It is the Holy Spirit who has made them “overseers” of the local church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2), and if they “rule well,” they are considered worthy of “double honour” (1 Tim 5:17). Elders must be able to "exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict" (Tit 1:9). They are NOT originators of new doctrines but enforcers and facilitators of those delivered through inspiration.

In every instance, we find a plurality of elders in the local church (never simply one elder), and Scripture sets forth detailed qualifications for those holding this office (1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9). For example, the elder "must be... the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2), and he must have “children who believe” (Tit 1:5). It is the local church which is "allotted to... (the elders') charge" (1 Pet 5:3), and their "oversight" did not extend beyond that local church. Each local church maintained its autonomy, and no organic tie bound one church to another.

Christians are to “appreciate those who diligently labour among... (them) and have charge over ... (them) in the Lord and give ... (them) instruction” (1 Thess 5:12). The Hebrew writer urges his brethren: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17). A group of men possessing specific qualifications and known as "deacons" (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-13) served under the elders, as did other Christians who functioned as teachers and evangelists (2 Tim 4:5).

We conclude this discussion with a quote on this topic from the late Norman L. Geisler, a highly influential and well-known Christian apologist, philosopher, and theologian. I quote Geisler for this reason: he was not a member of the restoration movement, but he was led by his study of Scripture to views similar to our own. In an article titled The Historical Development of Roman Catholicism, he writes:

"(The) immediate successors of the apostles followed the pattern of government laid down in the New Testament, namely, independent, autonomous local churches led by a plurality of elders (also called bishops). Second, it was not until the second century that even a basic episcopal form of government emerged with one bishop over each church."

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