

## “The Apostles and the Church”

Terry L. Johnson

### *This is the sixth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”*

Do the Apostles demonstrate an awareness of the implications of Jesus’ seminal words regarding the church? Indeed they do. They establish a *structure* for the church and a *dynamic* in the church through which what Jesus intended might be realized. In both cases, what the Apostles teach reveals the vital role that the church is to play in the life of each believer.

#### **Structure**

“Christ hath instituted a government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, declares the Westminster Assembly’s *Directory for Church-Government, for Church-Censures, and Ordination of Ministers* (1645).<sup>1</sup> The Apostles, having fulfilled their foundational ministry (Eph 3:7-10), see to it that elders are appointed for the ongoing life of the church. “When they had appointed elders for them in every church,” Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch are named, “they committed them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23). The Apostles were succeeded by councils of elders who were responsible for the continuing well-being of the church. On the one hand, the churches were “committed... to the Lord” for *His* safekeeping and care. On the other hand, a crucial step was taken to promote that safekeeping and care: *elders* were appointed.

We find the Apostle Paul’s directions to Titus reflecting the same structural commitment as he labors to establish order in the post-apostolic church: “appoint *elders* in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). Lengthy lists of qualifications for church officers are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9. They must be men of high and tested character because they must “manage” and “care for God’s church” (1 Tim 3:5). They “rule” (1 Tim 5:17). They have God-given authority. Church members are meant to honor that authority. Listen to the writer to the Hebrews:

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13:17)*

“Obey,” he says. “Submit,” he insists. To whom? *Leaders*. The language of authority is unmistakable. They “lead” (Heb 13:7). They “have charge” over members (1 Thess 5:12, NASB). The reason for this structure, this authority, this government is clear enough: “They are keeping watch over your souls” (Heb 13:17). Who are caring for my soul? Leaders are. My individual spiritual well-being is directly related to my place as a member in the church under the authority of elders. Godly men meeting as a council are to lead the church because this is the best (though not infallible) way to preserve the health of the church and its members.

The church that Jesus intends is at odds with today’s climate of hyper-*individualism*. Autonomous, unaccountable, free-floating believers are not envisioned. Detached, uncommitted believers indeed are aloof from the very place meant to provide for their long-term spiritual well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from Wayne R. Spears, “The Westminster Assembly’s Directory for Church Government,” in Charles G. Dennisen and Richard C. Gamble (eds.), *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: The Committee for the History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 83-98.

## *The Apostles and the Church*

Jesus' church also is at odds with hyper-*collectivism*. Authoritarian, unaccountable, autocratic church leaders cannot sustain the long-term spiritual well-being of believers. Apostles (individuals) replace themselves with elders (groups), not bureaucrats, for the sake of the health and well-being of the churches and their members. The New Testament does not envision believers outside of the visible, institutional church.

### **Dynamic**

The church, it must also be said, is more than a structure. It is more than an institution. It is a living organism, a body. The Apostles, especially Paul, use this metaphor to teach the mutual dependence, responsibility, and accountability of members for each other. The Apostle Paul develops these thoughts at length in Ephesians 4:11ff, 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 and Romans 12:4-21. The well-being of the church begins with gifted men (pastors and teachers) exercising their word gifts for the equipping of the saints and the building up of the body of Christ (Eph 4:11-15). This done, each part works properly and the whole body is built up in love (Eph 4:16). The point in the latter two passages is that gifts are distributed throughout the whole church body. We are all "members of one another" (Rom 12:5). Our gifts are "for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). God has "arranged the members in the body" and "composed the body" (1 Cor 12:18, 24). None of us can say to another member, "I have no need of you," any more than our eye can say that to our hand or our head to our feet (1 Cor 12:21). All the parts of the body are "indispensable" (1 Cor 12:22).

The body metaphor means that I cannot flourish spiritually apart from both the teaching of the gifted pastors and teachers, and a vital, living connection with other believers in the church. My spiritual health, growth, and very survival depends on it. The church is a living body in which all "contribute to the needs of the church" (Rom 12:13). We cannot have fingers cut off without being hurt. Fingers cannot sever themselves from the whole body without withering and dying.

What is the church? The church is both an institution and a living organism. The church as Jesus envisioned it and as the Apostles constructed it, has structure, organization, authority, membership, standards of conduct and belief, discipline, means of inclusion and exclusion, officers, a Great Commission, ministry and sacraments. It is also a living, growing, diverse body of mutually dependent parts. We repeat: the New Testament does not envision a believer outside of the church. Those who believe are baptized, the church's rite of admission, and they are "added to the number," the roll, of the church (Acts 2:38, 47; 4:4). Is not "in the church" where Jesus wants us, and where we need to be?

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