

Did the Apostles set up a ministry structure for the church? / COB / 12.07.14

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: blank]** Some believers, even some pastors, even some scholars will tell you that the apostles left no structural plan for the church, that anything goes and anything went. I find that offensive! Do we really believe that God did not have a plan for the successful administration of the worldwide church? Today we are going to take a walk together through the early church literature, to see how the apostles developed the ministry of the church after Christ ascended to Heaven.
 - You will need a Bible. If you don't have one with you, raise your hand, and someone will bring one to you now. Once you have a Bible, turn to the book of Acts...

New Testament

- † **Acts 1.13-15 NET:** [This is right after Christ ascended to Heaven] **When they had entered Jerusalem, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James were there. All these continued together in prayer with one mind, together with the women, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. In those days Peter stood up [and spoke] among the believers...**
 - This is the start of the church: all the believers, men and women, who were willing to wait as Christ had directed were together. Who are noted as being there? the apostles and Jesus' family. Who spoke as a leader? Peter, one of the apostles.
- † **[Slide 2] Acts 1.21-26 NET:** [Peter was speaking] **“Thus one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time the Lord Jesus associated with us, beginning from his baptism by John until the day he was taken up from us— one of these must become a witness of his resurrection together with us [to replace Judas Iscariot].” So they proposed two candidates: Joseph called Barsabbas (also called Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, “Lord, you know the hearts of all. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to assume the task of this service and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” Then they cast lots for them, and the one chosen was Matthias; so he was counted with the eleven apostles.**
 - It was important to replace the lost apostle, so they would have a spiritual co-leader as a witness to the truth of their teaching about Jesus and as a servant of the apostolic work Christ had given them.
 - From all of this, we see the apostles were the acknowledged leaders of the group in the upper room and a replacement for Judas Iscariot was necessary to carry on ministry leadership.
- † Once the Holy Spirit had come upon the disciples they went out in public, speaking in foreign languages, and being understood by Jews from those foreign lands. The non-believing Jews were confused by this, so we see in **Acts 2.14 NET:** **... Peter stood up with the eleven [the other apostles], raised his voice, and addressed them...**
 - The apostles [led by Peter] addressed the crowd at Pentecost, to explain that we were now in the “end times” about which the Old Testament prophets had spoken and that Jesus was the Messiah-savior promised by those prophets.

- † **[Slide 3]** After Peter explained what was happening and that the Jews should all accept Jesus as the Messiah-savior, we see in **Acts 2.41-43 NET: So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added. They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles.**
- That morning, they had 120 people in the church, and now there were more than 3000! That's impressive growth! When I pray for this church to grow, that's not what I'm talking about!
 - So how did the apostles respond to this new ministry challenge? The apostles began to teach sound doctrine to the believers in the new church.
 - They also did miracles, and – based on the description of their miracles later in Acts – I would say these miracles were part of reaching out to those who did not yet believe, to prove the authenticity of their message about Christ by showing the power of Christ.
- † **[Slide 4]** **Acts 4.33-35 NET: With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on them all [those in the church]. For there was no one needy among them, because those who were owners of land or houses were selling them and bringing the proceeds from the sales and placing them at the apostles' feet. The proceeds were distributed to each, as anyone had need.**
- Within the church, everyone accepted that the apostles had authority from Christ, and those apostles administrated over the ministry of the church.
- † **Acts 5.17-18 NET: Now the high priest rose up, and all those with him (that is, the religious party of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.**
- Just as inside the church, outsiders, particularly the Jewish religious leaders, viewed the apostles as in authority and therefore accountable for the Jesus movement.
- † **[Slide 5]** **Acts 6.1-4 NET: Now in those days, when the disciples were growing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the native Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the twelve [the apostles] called the whole group of the disciples [the church] together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables. But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."**
- So here we see the first sign of stress in the church growth movement. Thousands have joined the church, but there are only twelve men essentially running the church. At first, all there was to do was teach, pray, and evangelize, so they could do it all, and anything else that happened – like gathering for meals or collecting for the poor – was done somewhat organically, it just happened as people felt led by the Spirit.
 - Now there is a problem, because we see the first sign of dissention within the church, over the care which different ethnic groups of widows were receiving.
 - We see again that the apostles were in authority, nobody was questioning that. They received the complaint, they called a meeting of the church, they decided how to fix the problem.

- Look at what they said about their own role in the ministry: they wanted to remain focused on prayer and teaching [which would include evangelism by teaching the gospel].
- The apostles would now officially delegate some ministry responsibility and authority to other respected spiritual leaders in the church, to resolve this issue and ensure all the widows received the ministry help they needed.
- This is the first delegation of responsibility by the apostles: these seven leaders in Jerusalem would be under the authority of the apostles, but they would have the authority from the apostles to fulfill the responsibility they had received from the apostles.

† **[Slide 6] Acts 8.14-17 NET: Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. These two went down and prayed for them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. (For the Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans, and they received the Holy Spirit.**

- You might recall that the Samaritans were a mixed race people, part Jewish and part Gentile, who had been living separate in faith and society from the pure race Jews for hundreds of years, even though Samaria was smack in the middle of the land of Israel.
- When an evangelist from among the disciples led Samaritans to faith in Christ and baptized them in water, the apostles went to certify that the church was open to these people who traditionally were enemies of the Jews.
- Note three important things here: first, there were non-apostles doing evangelism in Christ's name; second, even so, the apostles had authority over evangelists and had to go certify their work; and third, the church was now open to both Jews and Samaritans.
- In Acts 10, God sent one apostle, Peter, to certify that the church is open also to Gentiles, who are 100% non-Jewish.

† **[Slide 7] Acts 9.17-20 NET: So Ananias [a disciple, but not an apostle] departed and entered the house, placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." [Remember, Saul had been killing and imprisoning Christians!] Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, his strength returned. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "This man is the Son of God."**

- The church had spread to Jews outside the traditional boundaries of Israel. At this time, churches in a place like Damascus did not have pastors or elders or any other official leader. They were under the guidance from the apostles and their emissaries, who travelled around, but they also were being led by the Holy Spirit to do the work of the ministry in the name of Christ.

† **Acts 11.19-21 NET: Now those who had been scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the message to no one but Jews. But there were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene among them who came to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks too, proclaiming the good news of the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.**

- This is the same situation as in Damascus, except here in Antioch we see the gospel spreading to Gentiles as well as Jews. This is after Peter has verified that the church would include Gentiles, back in Acts 10.
- † **[Slide 8] Acts 11.22-26 NET: A report about them came to the attention of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, because he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a significant number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught a significant number of people. Now it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.**
- Since disciples were spreading the gospel and the church farther afield, the apostolic church in Jerusalem sent emissaries – such as Barnabas to Antioch – to teach, encourage, lead, and continue evangelizing. Barnabas recruited Paul to help him with this work.
- † **Acts 12.1-3 NET: About that time King Herod laid hands on some from the church to harm them. He had James, the brother of John, executed with a sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too.**
- This is the first known death of an apostle [other than Judas Iscariot]. This was about AD47; so everything we have been discussing happened within the first fifteen years or so after Christ ascended to Heaven.
- † **When Peter escaped from prison, we see what he said in Acts 12.17 NET: He motioned to them with his hand to be quiet and then related how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. He said, “Tell James and the brothers these things [i.e. tell James and the other apostles],” and then he left and went to another place.**
- We just read that James the brother of John is dead, but this is James the brother of Jesus, whom we see here is a recognized leader of the Jerusalem church.
 - In Galatians 1.18-19, Paul wrote that James was recognized as an apostle when Paul first visited Jerusalem after becoming a Christian; this would have been about AD36.
- † **[Slide 9] Acts 13.1-2 NET: Now there were these prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen (a close friend of Herod the tetrarch from childhood) and Saul. While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”**
- Now we see prophets and teachers among disciples who were not apostles. And the Spirit led them to send Barnabas and Saul/Paul out as missionaries and church planters.
- † **Acts 14.14 NET: But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard about it [that people in Lystra were referring to them as gods], they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting...**
- Sometime before AD49, Paul and Barnabas also are called apostles.
- † **[Slide 10] Acts 14.23 NET: When they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in the various churches, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the protection of the Lord in whom they had believed.**

- As they planted churches, the apostles Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each. The elders would govern the church and administrate over the ministry of the church in that local area, under the authority of the apostles. They were to serve the apostles in the local church.

- † **Acts 15.2 NET: When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them** [some believers who came to Antioch teaching false doctrine], **the church** [in Antioch] **appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement.**
 - When a dispute arose about doctrine, Paul and Barnabas went to talk it over with the other apostles and the elders in Jerusalem.
 - We see that the church in Jerusalem had elders by this time, to help the apostles carry out the work of the ministry.
 - The church in Jerusalem, let by James and Peter [evident in this chapter], had authority over all the local churches, with the apostles being the ruling council of the worldwide church.

- † **Acts 15.22-23 NET: Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent this letter with them: From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings!**
 - The church in Jerusalem, under the guidance of apostles and elders, sent emissaries to the other churches with a letter from the apostles and elders. Acts 16.4 shows this letter went out to all the churches, and the people in the churches were expected to obey the letter.
 - Many of our New Testament books began as letters to one or more people or churches. We should always remember that this letter and all of the New Testament books have authority only because they come from the apostles or their designated emissaries.

- † **[Slide 11] Acts 20.17, 28 NET: From Miletus he [Paul] sent a message to Ephesus, telling the elders of the church to come to him... [Paul told them] “Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.”**
 - There were elders in Ephesus, leading the church under the authority of the apostles like Paul.
 - Note the synonymous use of elder, overseer, and shepherd. In the New Testament, elders, overseers, and shepherds are the same people. They are leading the local church under the authority of the apostles.

- † **[Slide 12] Titus 1.5 NET: [Paul wrote] The reason I left you [Titus] in Crete was to set in order the remaining matters and to appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.**
 - Paul delegated “apostolic” authority to Titus on Crete, to appoint elders in all the churches there. So not only were the apostles in charge, but they could appoint others, emissaries like Titus, to be in charge in their name, even to plant churches and appoint elders.

- † Now let me summarize and point out a couple of interesting items. The apostles were in charge of the church, even as it spread throughout the empire. They had complete authority from Christ, to

define correct doctrine, to direct the teaching and evangelism, and to administrate over the church and its ministry.

- The apostles delegated authority and responsibility to emissaries to temporarily oversee local churches, like when they sent Barnabas to teach in Antioch or Titus to appoint elders in Crete.
- The apostles delegated authority and responsibility for some work in the local church of Jerusalem, as they did in Acts 6 for the care of the widows.
- The apostles delegated authority and responsibility in all local churches to elders they appointed, who were under apostolic authority and represented the apostles by carrying out the work of apostles in that local area. Such elders were also called overseers and shepherds.

† Now our first surprise: have you noticed? there are no pastors in the New Testament era church!

- We sometimes think there are, because in **Ephesians 4.11-12 NET** [Paul wrote]: **It was he [Christ] who gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, to equip the saints [believers] for the work of ministry...**
- **[Slide 13]** But the word translated as “pastors” here actually is the plural of the Greek word ποιμήν, which means “shepherd.” And we have seen that the shepherds in the New Testament were the elders. The elders were what we would consider pastors, they were the ones doing the top level ministry work under the authority of the apostles.

† Now for our second surprise: **Philippians 1.1 NET: From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints [believers] in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers [elders] and deacons.**

- Who are these deacons? It is a bit of a mystery! This is the first mention of deacons in the New Testament, about AD61.
- **[Slide 14]** But as we will see next week, Paul wrote not much later to Timothy [who by then was on his own in Ephesus] about the requirements for deacons, which are like those for elders, so we conclude that the deacons must have been recognized spiritual leaders in the local churches who were under the authority of the elders, who in turn were under the authority of the apostles and their emissaries.

† So there was a ministry structure: Christ was the head of the church; the apostles [and their emissaries] represented Christ and were in authority over everything. The pastor/elders represented the apostles and were in authority over the local churches. The deacons represented the elders in the local church and had specific responsibilities there. All the believers were carrying out the work of the ministry, including evangelizing, teaching, prophesying, serving, and giving as they were able and Spirit led.

- All that was good! It was God’s design and it worked! And we should be encouraged to see that not only did God have a plan, but the apostles established it throughout all the churches. But what would happen when the apostles and their emissaries like Titus and Timothy died?

Early Church Documents

† To find out, we have to consult documents we have from the early church. These are not scripture inspired by God, but they are historical artifacts that shed light on the practices of the early church.

These documents show that the apostles guided the church into a structural model that was consistent with what they had – what we just saw - and reproducible throughout the generations.

- † The letter First Clement is dated about AD95. It is from Clement in Rome to the Corinthian church. This letter shows the apostles expected the office of elder to continue existing, with new elders appointed to fill vacancies. Another document, called The Didache [διδάχη = the Teaching], dated a little earlier, also says the churches should appoint themselves elders and deacons as needed.
 - At this time, each local church in a specific city like Rome would be unified under its elders, but would meet for worship in little gatherings in houses, with one elder over each. So each gathering had one pastor/elder to lead and teach, but those leaders met together periodically and worked out any issues of governing the church in that city. Scholars believe that by the year AD150, there were over 200 such house churches in Rome alone.
 - **[Slide 15]** The fourth century church historian, Eusebius, wrote that Clement was the lead elder or senior pastor of Rome for nine years, before his death. With the apostles and their emissaries gone, what developed in Rome was that one of the elders was elevated to be lead elder or senior pastor, and he led the team of local elders, who led the other spiritual leaders in the church. Clement was the third such non-apostolic leader in Rome. And even before the turn of the century, he had authority to write to another church to criticize their behavior.
 - Eusebius pointed out that Timothy filled this lead elder role in Ephesus and Titus did so on Crete, while they were emissaries of the apostles to those churches. Before the apostles died, they sometimes filled this role of lead elder: Paul did this during long stays in churches he planted, as did James in Jerusalem, John in Ephesus, and Peter in Antioch.
- † We have seven letters dating to around AD110, from Ignatius, the lead elder of Antioch, to other churches. Ignatius repeatedly refers to a single lead elder in authority over a council of elders in each city, including Ephesus.
 - According to Eusebius, many of the first lead elders were appointed and consecrated by the apostles before they died, suggesting they were to carry on the work of the apostles. We see this also in the writings of Irenaeus, who became the lead elder in Lyons in the second century. Still other writings point to lead elders presiding in other churches throughout the empire.
 - So within a few decades, we see a pattern from Lyons in France to Rome to Ephesus in Turkey to Antioch in Syria to Alexandria in Egypt. Both Ignatius and Eusebius state that this pattern developed throughout the early church, including in Jerusalem: a lead elder/senior pastor leading the council of pastor/elders, who would lead the church with the help of deacons.
 - Michael Svigel, the head of the theology department at Dallas Theological Seminary, argues that since this system was so widespread so soon after the death of the apostles, it must have come by their initiative, they must have set it up under God's direction.
- † At this time, each city's church was still independent, though accountable to each other, and each lead elder was part of a federation of equals, who were accountable to each other. And all of the churches, the lead elders, the other elders, and every other believer were accountable to scripture, including the New Testament, which was written with apostolic authority.

Conclusion and Application

- † Ok, so what? That is the risk of a teaching like this, what if nobody cares? We should value any time spent in scripture and we should be able to find some encouragement and direction from this study.
- † **[Slide 16]** After describing the criteria for elders and deacons, Paul wrote in **1 Timothy 3.14-15 NET: I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you in case I am delayed, to let you know how people ought to conduct themselves in the household of God, because it is the church of the living God, the support and bulwark of the truth.**
 - It can be confusing when we look at the many different ways churches govern themselves today, but Paul wanted Timothy to know that God had a plan for the structure of the church. And we can see that plan develop throughout the history of the New Testament period and then beyond into the first decades after the apostles died away.
 - It should encourage us to know that God did foresee the need for ministry structure and that he provided the church with guidance to meet her needs as they would develop over time, including a plan to protect against false doctrines and false writings through the system of apostolic authority. The apostles carefully set up a system of administration, mentored key leaders in each major church, sent emissaries to do the same, and provided the New Testament writings, all to protect the church and help it thrive. Our God is good!
- † **[Slide 17]** **2 Thessalonians 2.15 NET: Therefore, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions that we taught you, whether by speech or by letter.**
 - Here is our direction: we are to carry out the traditions begun and taught by the apostles. It should be further encouraging that this church has it mostly right! This was one reason I was willing to come here as the lead elder or senior pastor.
 - **[Slide 18]** First, we are committed to follow the direction of the apostles who were under the authority of Christ. That means we base all our decisions and teachings on scripture, supplemented by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
 - Second, we have one team of pastors and elders working together. Some elders are paid and full time, while others are unpaid and part-time, but this follows an example we see in scripture. The elders are the legal board of directors of the church, and the lead elder/senior pastor is the Chairman of the Board and CEO, just as developed in the early church.
 - Third, we are committed to a ministry of empowering everyone else in the church to grow spiritually and do the work of God. This means we help people develop into ministry leaders and we help empower everybody to do the work God has for them at any given time. Eldership is not about power, it is about empowerment.
 - I hope it encourages you to see how closely we at COB are adhering to the apostolic model!
- † This week we took a big picture view of how church structure developed. Next week we will look at the criteria and responsibilities of each group within the church: the pastor/elders, the deacons and other spiritual leaders, and everyone else in the church.
 - I hope you go away today encouraged and enlightened about God's plan for the success of church ministry and his gospel mission.