

Lesson Eight: Church Leaders and Organization

In the book of Acts the apostles and other Christian people travel throughout the Roman Empire preaching about Jesus and making Christians. In every place where Christians were made, churches naturally sprung up. The word church means “assembly.” A church is simply a group of Christians who band together to worship the Lord; to strengthen, encourage and serve each other and to carry out the Great Commission in their area.

At first the only leaders which the churches had were the Apostles, but as more and more churches were established, it became impossible for the Apostles to take care of all the people. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the Apostles organized the local churches so that they could take care of themselves and spread “the faith” to the lost in their area.

ELDERS IN EVERY CHURCH

The first mention of Christian elders or elders of the church in Acts is **Acts 11:27-30**. **The elders of the churches** in Judea received the famine relief on behalf of their churches because they **were the recognized leaders**.

At the end of the First Missionary Journey of Paul and Barnabas, they revisit all the Christians and churches they made on the first half of the journey and they “appoint elders in every church.” **Acts 14:21-23**. **Elders is plural indicating that at least two or more elders were leading each church.**

Later on in **Acts 20:17** the Apostle Paul sends for the **elders** (Greek = *presbuteroi*) of the church at Ephesus to meet him on the island of Miletus for a last visit with them before going on to Jerusalem. A few verses later (**Acts 20:28**) Paul calls these elders **overseers or bishops** (Greek = *episkopoi*) and tells them that they are to **shepherd, pastor or feed** (Greek = *poimaino*) the church of God. **The terms elder, pastor, shepherd, bishop, overseer all refer to the same group of men who led the congregations of the first century church.**

Not just any Christian man could be an elder or bishop or shepherd in a congregation, There are three lists of qualifications set down in scripture for one who would serve a congregation as an elder or bishop or shepherd. **I Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9 and I Peter 5:1-5**. **Even though the Apostles are no longer with us to appoint elders for our churches, the church can appoint legitimate elders by following these qualifications.**

Elders/Shepherds/Pastors in the church are to be respected by the churches and Christians which they lead. **I Timothy 5:17-19**.

God wants every Christian and church to have the spiritual oversight and leadership of qualified elders. **Hebrews 13:7 and 17**.

DEACONS IN EVERY CHURCH

Every church had deacons as well as elders. **Philippians 1:1**. Deacon literally means “servant.” Deacons were the hands and feet of the body of Christ and they served under the leadership of the elders. There were qualifications for being a deacon. **I Timothy 3:8-13**.

OTHER LEADERS IN THE CHURCH

Ephesians 4:11 reads like this: And He gave some as apostles and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers. This is a list of those who led through the ministry of teaching. Deacons are not mentioned here because their ministry was focused more on practical service. No doubt some prophets or evangelists also served as deacons. Compare the example of Philip who served in food distribution (Acts 6:1-7) and also as an evangelist (Acts 8).

Apostle: clearly defined in the New Testament as a firsthand witness of the ministry, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. **Acts 1:15-26.** An apostle of Christ had the promise of John 16:12-15, special guidance and power from God. The apostles of Christ are no longer among us but their teaching remains in the form of the New Testament.

Prophet: literally, “spokesman.” Christian prophets spoke for God to the people of God in various settings. While the New Testament was incomplete and still being formed, Christian prophets spoke by the revelation and power of the Holy Spirit. With the completion of the New Testament, this miraculous gift ceased to exist.

Evangelist: whereas the prophet spoke primarily to Christian people, the evangelist focused his efforts on the lost.

Pastors and Teachers: A reference to elders or bishops in the church.

Specific qualifications can be found in the New Testament for an apostle, an elder or a deacon. Specific qualifications are lacking for the prophet or evangelist.

THE EARLY CHURCH WAS SELF-GOVERNING AND INDEPENDENT

Unlike many modern churches there was no earthly headquarters for the congregations of the first-century. The churches governed themselves through their own elders and their understanding of God’s word. The head of the church was not a man, but was Christ himself. **Colossians 1:18**

THE EARLY CHURCH WAS NON-DENOMINATIONAL

None of our modern-day denominations are found in the pages of the New Testament. The only church which existed then is the church which Jesus built beginning with the Day of Pentecost in 33 AD. We believe it is possible to be a part of the church that Jesus built without being a part of any modern denomination and that modern denominationalism has been more of a hindrance than a help to the cause of Christ.

Unity was important to the early church. Ephesians 4:3-6

Division in the body of Christ was condemned. I Corinthians 1:10-17

Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers so that the world might believe. John 17:20-21