

The Essential Simplicity of the New Testament Church

By Alan Stenfalt

2. Church Government

Previously we looked at the experience of a young man who walked into a meeting of Christians who were seeking to worship God in the simple manner revealed in the New Testament (NT). He soon found this simplicity was also being applied to the way the church was ordered and governed.

It was some eighteen years later, in a different situation, that he attended his first “church member’s meeting”. Having no previous church background and with only the Scriptures to refer to, he had found nothing strange about the absence of such a thing in the place to which God first brought him. He did not find it strange that the elders of the church were counted equal in accountability and authority, nor that membership of the church was defined without resorting to a formal “membership role”. Members were recognised as those whose lives and profession gave credible evidence of a work of grace in their hearts and of a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and to serving Him in the local congregation. Only later did he find that many fellow Christians were greatly troubled at such ideas.

Again, this simplicity of church order had nothing to do with a desire for novelty, nor was it a reaction against what any others might be doing. This was simply a small group of around twenty believers quietly seeking to understand and apply what Scripture reveals as NT practice.

They accepted the full inspiration of the Scriptures as not only containing but being in themselves, the Word of God. They therefore fully accepted their authority and sufficiency. 2 Tim. 3:16-17 was, if you like, the card that outscores 2000 years of church traditions and every current fashion of contemporary practice. If ALL Scripture is inspired by God, who knows the end from the beginning and does everything after the counsel of His own will – then all is profitable (serviceable, advantageous) for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness. Until the end of the age, nothing in Scripture will be rendered unprofitable or irrelevant by the passing of time, by extra-biblical tradition or by changes in secular culture. If he has his Bible, the man of God is complete, needing nothing more. He is fully equipped to determine God’s will

for the government, teaching and practice of the church. Our friend found himself among a people who wanted to ignore nothing revealed in the NT and to be governed by nothing foreign to it.

How Did this Result in the Situation Briefly Described Above?

The foundation principle is that the church revealed in the NT is not a democracy but a theocracy. Christ is the head of the body, the church, and He comes before all (Col. 1:16-18). All authority is given to Him (Matt. 28:18).

This simple fact is to be recognised, accepted and applied in the government of the church.

How was the headship and pre-eminence of Christ applied in the practice of this local church?

They saw that in the NT, the church was not governed by the will of the majority expressed in a vote at a member's meeting. No instructions as to how such a meeting should be convened or conducted are given, nor is any example of such a meeting quoted in the NT. Scripture gives no warrant for a democratic form of government.

When a problem arose in Acts 6 concerning the distribution of aid to widows, it was not resolved at a member's meeting by putting a resolution to a vote. The apostles decided what should be done (and why) and gave their instructions to the church. The demand of the Judaisers that Gentile believers should be circumcised was a crucial matter but again, the issue was not decided by a vote of the members of the church in Antioch. Paul, Barnabas and others were sent to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders there. When they arrived the matter was not put to a member's meeting but, "the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6).

The Sovereign Head of the church exercised His rule first through men to whom He delegated the task of making known and applying His will in the churches. This He did by direct revelation to the apostles and prophets of the NT. Each local church is now to be built on this foundation (Eph. 2:20).

Having completed their task, there was no need for apostles and prophets to be replaced. The churches now have the will of the Head for the establishment, governance, teaching and practice of the church revealed in the Scriptures. The responsibility of applying His revealed will in each congregation is assigned to elders (Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; Acts 20:17, 28).

Men who are recognised by the congregation as having the high qualities required by Scripture are to be appointed elders in every church. Each one, without exception, is responsible to oversee and shepherd (pastor) the flock. Paul called the elders at Ephesus to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of

God” (Acts 20:28). Peter assigns the same responsibilities to all elders, “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers” (1 Pet. 5:2).

Giving the title “pastor” to only one of the elders is foreign to the NT and introduces a distinction where no difference is warranted. (This does not preclude one or more of the elders being remunerated for labouring in the Word and doctrine, 1 Cor. 9:14). When any matter comes before the elders, each is accountable to God for praying and thinking through how the revealed will of God in Scripture is to be applied. Each elder must respect this accountability of each of his brethren as they seek a common mind. This puts them all at the same level. At the same time, the elders, being forbidden to lord it over the flock (1 Pet. 5:3), must also heed the views of the church. Long eldership meetings can be expected.

Following this simple NT pattern of a plurality and parity of elders, the Head of the church can be expected to exercise His sovereign will without the necessity of imposing the will of the majority through a vote at a members meeting. (Which has its own disadvantages: (a) As previously pointed out, such a meeting has no NT warrant. (b) The vote of a complete tyro carries equal weight with that of the godly saint who has been many years in the way. (c) In such a meeting, the views of those well used to speaking out in public get prominence, at the expense of those who are of a gentle and quiet spirit who go unheard. Though their views may be of far greater value, being seasoned with salt and motivated by grace.)

Can it work?

Is such a simple approach naïve, wishful thinking or is it NT simplicity?

The perceptive comment of one who was considering such an approach to church government is true. He said, “It depends very much on the quality of the men called to eldership if this is to work.” A church needing to appoint elders must therefore take particular care how it approaches the task.

This will be considered in a final article together with some objections to the application of this principle of seeking to ignore nothing revealed in the NT and being governed by nothing foreign to it.