

# The Essential Simplicity of the New Testament Church

*By Alan Stenfalt*

## 3. Reflections and Responses

The church life described in the previous articles is not wishful thinking, nor is it viewed through rose tinted spectacles. I saw it working over a period of some fifteen years and, converted into this situation, saw all this as normal Christianity. That was half a lifetime ago but memories of those days are still vivid in my mind and I have certainly experienced nothing else quite like them. Another involved in those days described them as, “Our halcyon days.” He perhaps appreciated better than some of us at the time, something of the special significance of what was happening.

Another, who experienced something very similar in a congregation in Ireland and is now working to plant churches in pioneer situations, encouraged to hear the things I have related, said how he was, “longing to see something more akin to what is evident in the NT”. “At the moment”, he said, “We who see things this way are widely scattered, but times change and ideas alien to one generation may be warmly embraced by the next. If we have any light from the Lord on these matters, we are responsible to share it with others wherever we may find one or two willing to listen.”

Commenting on Romans 12 (Banner of Truth Commentary ch. 21) Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said, “Evangelical Reformed Churches do not conform to the New Testament Pattern. We must start again... be concerned about one thing... do we really conform to the N.T. pattern? We must reform ourselves. If we long for the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon us we must honour his Word.”

Without being aware of the Doctor’s comments this was the objective of this young congregation who simply wanted to discover and attempt to implement the NT pattern for church worship, order and government.

The motive was not to criticise what others might be doing but if some had difficulty with what resulted, they were prepared to explain themselves.

### **Objection No. 1**

Some said for example that - The absence of members meetings denies the members their say and puts too much power in the hands of the elders.

In the New Testament (NT) however, we find that the church is not governed by the will of the majority expressed in a vote at a member's meeting. The church is not a democracy, it has a sovereign King. Christ is the Head of the church and all authority belongs to Him. His people are to express their love for Him in their willing obedience to His commandments which He revealed to the NT apostles and prophets. These are now infallibly recorded in the inspired NT Scriptures to be the foundation until the end of time on which the church is to be built and run (Eph. 2:20). This is described more fully in the second article.

With the passing of apostles and prophets (their job being completed) the authority to apply the NT Scriptures in a local church has been delegated to elders appointed in each assembly (Tit. 1:5). These men are to be shepherds of Christ's flock (1 Pet. 5:2) who are to submit to their oversight (Heb. 13:7). Their authority, however, is limited. They are not to "lord it" over the flock (1 Pet. 5:3) but to be examples to them of how to follow Christ and his Word.

These elders were appointed in each assembly by those responsible for the oversight. This was originally the apostles or their delegated assistants (e.g. Titus 1:5) but how are these men to be appointed today?

Elders: Their Appointment (Acts 14:23)

We must look to the Scriptures to find some principles to guide us.

First we must note that true elders are appointed by God -

"Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Acts.20:28

Remember that Christ is the Head of the Church. He reigns over her affairs. He gives the Church Pastor - Teachers. He delegates responsibility and authority to them and HE appoints them. God calls every true elder to the work. Appointing an elder therefore, is not simply a matter of holding an election of church members. Rather, it is recognising God's appointment of the man to the work.

How does the church do that?

Again – the Bible provides some principles to follow -

Paul and Barnabas appointed [ordained] 'elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.' Acts 14:23

'For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint [ordain] elders in every city as I commanded you.' Titus 1:5

(NB. All elders are "ordained" men)

Notice that in Acts.14:23, Paul & Barnabas appointed elders in the churches and in Titus 1:5, Titus was to appoint elders as instructed by Paul and on the authority of Paul. In other words the appointment of elders was done here by or with the authority of an apostle.

So what do we have so far?

1. True Elders are chosen by God.
2. Their appointment is the responsibility of existing church leaders i.e. the apostles.

The problem is we no longer have any apostles!

There are three things that help us here.

1. The Greek word in Acts 14:23 and Tit. 1:5 which is translated ‘appointed’ or ‘ordained’, has the meaning – to choose, to vote by stretching out the hand, to create or appoint by vote, or to elect. So there was some element of election in the process.
2. It is helpful to look at some other appointments in Scripture. Read Exod. 18:17-23 and Deut. 1:9-13.

Moses told Israel, “You choose the men (who are wise, understanding, respected, etc.) and I will appoint them.” It seems that under the guidance of the apostles, the early church took note of the same principle (read Acts 6:1-6).

The apostles said to the church, “You choose the men (who have the right qualifications) and we will appoint them.”

3. We don’t have an apostle but we do have Paul’s instructions on how to recognise an elder, what qualities to look for (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9).

So how should we go about appointing elders if we are to follow a biblical pattern? Following on from what we have so far, our method must recognise Four Principles -

1. Elders are appointed by God.
2. Their appointment is the responsibility of the existing spiritual leadership.
3. They must possess the qualities given – under inspiration – in Scripture.
4. They must be recognised by the members of the church as men who possess those qualities and whose authority they will accept.

How can we put these principles into practice?

Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit (with fasting Acts 14:23 – indicates the solemn importance of appointing leaders), that His will may be known and done.

Where there are existing spiritual leaders, they should direct the church to the relevant biblical requirements and functions of elders.

Rather than nominate men for election, they should then ask each member to put forward the name or names of men they recognise as having the necessary qualifications and to whom they would be ready to submit.

The existing spiritual leadership must then exercise the authority God has given them and consider the names submitted by the members of the church. They should seek the Holy Spirit's leading through the church, looking to see if the mind of the church is clear. Such men as meet the Scriptural requirements and have the support of the church should then be appointed (ordained).

## **Objection No. 2**

It has also been said - The absence of a formal membership role makes discipline impossible

The absence of a list of names in a book, however, makes no practical difference to taking the action required by the NT. What can be done then if, after admonition and a call to repentance, someone recognised as a member refuses to comply? The NT is clear and calls on the whole company of believers to respond in loving obedience to the revealed will of the Head of the church - with the complete restoration of the offender as the objective (Luke 17:3).

‘If he neglects to hear the church, let him be to you as a heathen and a tax-collector.’  
Mat.18:17

‘And I exhort you, brothers, to watch those making divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them.’  
Rom. 16:17

‘But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."  
1 Cor. 5:11-13

All this can be done with, or without, members' names being formally written in a book. As discussed in the second article, 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.

### **Conclusion**

The NT presents a church of essential simplicity compared with its modern western manifestations but from its birth at Pentecost and through its early centuries it followed this simple pattern in its worship, government and evangelism.

The loss of that simplicity was gradual and had small, apparently innocent beginnings but came to its full development with the arrival of the Roman Emperor Constantine in AD 306. The quest to recover that NT simplicity existed from the beginning, however, and never quite vanished, even in its darkest hours and still exists to this day.

Many have become dismayed and discouraged by the present state of Conservative Evangelical Churches and have been challenged to search for a new way forward. Perhaps what is needed is not a new way but an old way – the old way mapped out by the Holy Spirit in the NT. It worked when Christianity came into the world and found the world violently opposed to it. It will work today when the world is again increasingly opposed to Biblical Christianity.

What is needed is not reformation but building afresh on the original foundation.

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”  
John 14:21

The church at Philadelphia did this and the Head of the church said to them -

“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.”  
Rev. 3:8