

Lesson

8

THE CHURCH ... Structure and Authority

Spiritual Home

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Paul likens the Church to the 'Body of Christ'. The members of the church make up the different parts of the body, and must neatly fit together to form a whole, just as the human body must, in order to function correctly.

We are all created to be different, and we each have our own individual role to play as part of the Body of Christ here on earth. As a Christian, it is important to find which particular part of the local Body of Christ we are going to make our spiritual home. It is from this perspective that we can then find our own individuality in Christ - not as an independent Christian, but as someone inter-dependent, and committed to seeing God's purposes on earth fulfilled through his chosen vessel - the Church:

"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23)

Just as it is with our own natural body, it is imperative that the Body of Christ functions in harmony and unity. There are so many different churches around that it can sometimes be confusing. Who is right? Who should I listen to?

As we grow in faith it becomes easier, in a spiritual sense, to discern right from wrong, and therefore to avoid churches that have a form of religion, but deny the power of it (2 Timothy 3:1-17), or who may preach a compromised gospel.

There are many different denominations of God-fearing, Spirit-filled churches, and God will lead you as you grow. The Holy Spirit promises to lead us into all truth (John 16:13), and the Bible, the Word of God, is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105).

1 Peter 2:9 states that:

"We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God"

In Romans 12:4,5, Paul declares:

"For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ"

Becoming part of the Body of Christ

As Christians it is essential that we become an active part of the Body of Christ, and this is achieved by becoming a committed part of a local church. A lone Christian is just about as useful as an arm or finger left lying on the sidewalk, and ***casual Christians often become Christian casualties!*** Joining a local church will mean meeting and making new friends, and becoming active in what is now your new spiritual family in Christ.

This does not, however, mean neglecting your natural family in any way. Indeed, a person in true communion with Jesus Christ and his Body, should be able to function better in every area of their lives, including their relationships at home, work or school.

In John 15 uses another analogy - that of the vine and the branches. *Read this chapter through carefully.* Jesus says that it is by bearing much fruit that the Father is glorified, and by this we prove to be His disciples (v8). We are also His friends, if we do what He commands (v14).

Local Church Structure

God has placed **all things** under Jesus' feet (Ephesians 1:18-23), and appointed Him to be the head over everything for the Church. The Bible calls the Church the Bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7-9). Revelation 21:2 refers to the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, as a bride adorned for her husband. A marriage relationship is a pattern of Jesus' relationship to His Church (Ephesians 5:25-27), which He is preparing for that great day when we get to go to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Whilst all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18), He chose to delegate great authority to His Church. The Kingdom of God is the Church (Mark 4:30-32), the Body of Christ.

The Bible teaches that we are not of this world (John 15:19; 17:14), but we have been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). As such we must take our place as responsible citizens of the Kingdom of God if we expect to see God's blessing continually released into our lives.

We have been given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 16:19), and instructed to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. In this way all our needs will continually and abundantly be met (Matt 6:33; John 10:10).

All power and authority rests with the Head of the Church, which is Jesus Christ. Apart from the Head there is no authority, for the Head is the source of all authority. All other authority exercised is delegated authority (Romans 3:1). By actively participating in God's kingdom structure, and becoming one with it, we become candidates for the channelling of God's divine power and authority in our own lives.

The Church is not nearly as fragmented as people think. There has only ever been one, true Church. It covers many denominations, and is not restricted to any particular creed or dogma that man has created. When God moves by His Spirit and people get saved, their needs met, and wounds healed, then we are operating as His Church. When we cease to do this and settle into a form of religion that no longer preaches the uncompromising Word of God, but adds or subtracts from it in various ways, then we are not functioning within the Scriptural definition of His Church, being outside of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the earth.

Many will be surprised at who is rewarded, and who is cast aside, when the final glorious day of judgment arrives (Matthew 7:21-23).

There are two streams today

Over the years **Pastor Hal Oxley** stated many times that **two streams** exist within the established church, and as time goes by these two streams will become more and more obvious as their differences emerge and come to the attention of the church as a whole. Some of these traits can already be obvious to many. Hal states:

- a) There seems to be two clearly discernible streams in Christianity today. One, a slowly dying stream which statistics, worldwide, confirm. The other, a vital, vibrant and fast growing stream mainly, but not entirely, characterised by Pentecostal/charismatic believers and their experiences and doctrines of the Holy Spirit.
- b) It is understood that 34% of the world's population claim to be Christian, against 20% Muslim and 13% Hindu - the three major world religions. Of the 34% Christian (around 2 billion), 36% of these are practising Pentecostal/Charismatics with Roman Catholics just over 50%, leaving the remaining 14% Christians who do not fall in the previous two categories, such as traditional churches.
- c) Taking non-Catholics only, 72% of people worldwide are Pentecostal/Charismatic, and 28% are the other Protestant and Anglican denominations. (Source IBMR).
- d) These two Protestant streams flow through all denominations and consist of:
 - ♦ **Those who are completely surrendered to the Lord** (Phil 3:7-8) consecrated, obedient to the word (Luke 6:46), completely committed (2 Tim 1:12), with a believer's walk (1 John 2:6; 1:7), "sold out" for God.
 - ♦ **Those who are lukewarm** (Rev 3:16) lacking commitment (Jer 48:10a), the fruit of good works (James 4:17; Prov 21:13), and without dedication to truth (Rom 12:1).
- e) Hal believes we will eventually see a separation of the two streams - one into a world church involving all major religions, and the other into the True Church, which the Lord Jesus prophesied would be the light of the world (Matt 5:14). The beginnings of this can already be perceived.

Church Growth Continues

Hal Oxley goes on to say that strict churches are experiencing the greatest growth. A strict church is one that has a clear authoritative doctrine, rigorous religious practices and demanding membership requirements.

Its serious approach to religion (Christianity) creates a strong identity that distinguishes a strict church from non-religious organisations or liberal religious organisations.

What most people want most out of religion is - religion! Liberal churches that try to accommodate the secular world by offering a refined, reasonable, intellectual faith keep losing people to the even more reasonable pleasures such as gold, a warm bed or more pleasing company. Therefore evidence would appear to confirm that:

A strong and gifted senior pastor is a major key to church growth!

The Chain of Command

The Church, as part of God's kingdom, has a predetermined chain of command, with proper authority, structure and accountability:

"And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:11-13)

"Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb 13:17)

Men may argue and fight over position and power, but God's men are known by the fruit, and the gifts, of their ministry. It is the character and integrity of the individual, as well as their ability to put their gifts to effective use, which determines the quality and success of their ministry. Jesus even had trouble with His disciples at one point (Luke 22:24-30), and had to instruct them on what it meant to lay down their lives and serve one another. We haven't changed much over the centuries!

The Father gave headship of this kingdom structure to Jesus Christ, who now functions in His Body (the Church), through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Col 1:18; Eph 1:22,23). God has delegated authority to overseers to administer the Church. By relating in this way to God's ordained structure we are, in fact, being obedient to the Head, which is Christ (Heb 13:17).

God placed "Gifted Ministries" (also known as: **Ascension Gift Ministries**) in the Body of Christ. These **Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers** (Eph 4:11-13), must in turn appoint leaders within the Church. They are to train the saints to function as ministers to the Body of Christ, and properly equip them for the task of extending the Kingdom of God on earth. In the New Testament these appointed leaders are called **Elders** (1 Tim 3:1-7) and **Deacons** (1 Tim 3:8-13), and those believers equipped to serve are called **Body (as in Body of Christ) Ministries** (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12).

Almost anyone in Pentecostal ministry these days is considered a **Pastor** (*Gifted Ministry*). "**Ministry Team**" is the term often chosen for the leadership team of the church, consisting of pastors and elders. Deacons (Gk: *diakonos*, meaning *servant*) function under a wide variety of titles from administration to business to finance to building maintenance, and much more besides.

The biblical pattern is open to broad interpretation as far as church governance is concerned, from papal to congregational to presbytery to the top-down style of many Pentecostal churches. However, as far as character qualifications and gifting are concerned, these are far more critical to the success of any local church.

The following diagram helps illustrate the leadership structure of the Church, as God ordained it in the Bible. It shows the proper authority order that has been prescribed according to Scripture.

The Authority Structure of the Church



A Source of some Confusion

One of the main points to remember is that no denomination on earth can claim exclusive right to the position of God's Holy Church. No denomination can therefore, by inference or direct claim, exclude the rest of the Body of Christ, or sections that suit them. It is arrogant and deceptive to make such claims. History clearly shows no one has all the truth, all of the time.

This is a great source of confusion to many, who often spend their whole lives believing that membership of a particular denomination is all that is required to get them into heaven! It can come as a complete surprise when they are faced with a real-life encounter with the living Christ, and become born-again by the Spirit of God, that what they assumed was a relationship with God was nothing more than a relationship with a religious institution!

A period of deep soul-searching often follows as they get used to the fact that membership of their church is not always the same as membership of the Body of Christ. The early church had similar difficulties from the very beginning, and John's Revelation (Rev 2 & 3) gave us an insight as to what Jesus truly thought about them at the time. His words are still very relevant to the church today! These words are sobering, considering the authority they are spoken with, but it didn't stop men getting it wrong then, and it doesn't stop them getting it wrong today.

As Christians we must be on our guard to love all men, especially those of the family of God (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 2:17), and not be too critical if we have moved out of one church structure into another. What didn't work for one person might work quite well for someone else!

We would counsel every new believer to be cautious of returning to a prior denomination if these last few paragraphs describe your experience. A young Christian needs building up in their faith. Even a Christian of some experience, who is just coming out of a lifeless church or denomination, will still need building up in their faith. Returning to their old church can seem like a good idea at the time, but can often be disappointing, and very challenging.

Our faith needs to be built up, and this is done by hearing - as in hearing the Word of God preached (Rom 10:17) - and by gathering together in fellowship with true saints of God (Heb 10:25) with whom we are in agreement. If we didn't find Jesus after years in a prior church setting, we may not find its leaders, and possibly the members also, much interested in hearing what we have to say about our new experience with Jesus, particularly if it originated in a church they may not approve of such as a "Charismatic" or "Pentecostal" church, even though that was basically the makeup of the New Testament church.

If you have also been baptised in the Holy Spirit you are not only a "new creature in Christ" (2 Cor 5:17), but you have also received "power from on high" (Acts 1:8), and probably have some experience of the gifts of the Spirit, such as praying in tongues. This can cause great anguish to churches that preach and teach against these type of experiences and can cause a young believer great confusion and hardship if they think they can return to their "old church" with the power and life of the Spirit upon them and teach them something new. It will cause a reaction, and this may not always be a positive thing.

Some Strange Opinions on Church

Jesus died for His Church. He called His Church a rock, and taught that the gates of Hell would never prevail against it (Matt 16:18). Despite the power and authority vested in the church by Christ, there are still many contrary views on what the church is, and what it is supposed to do.

For example, a group of young people, when asked to describe the picture that came into their minds when they heard the word "**church**", said this:

- ◆ Ancient grey building, ceremonies, robes, candles
- ◆ Dithering, unmanly, sentimental, weak
- ◆ A place of charity, welfare, helping the poor
- ◆ A place of learning, a kind of school
- ◆ Where people find God and learn how to pray
- ◆ Long sermons, a big bore, a waste of time
- ◆ People who think they are better than anyone else

Most of these comments are a far cry from God's intention, and indeed, the reality of much of the church of Jesus Christ. Let's compare this to some of the things the Bible says about church.

The Church of the New Testament

The word **church** comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, used to denote a meeting of all the citizens of a city (polis). This "calling out" (ex=out, klesis=call or invitation) was for the purpose of being "called together" for a meeting. "*ekklesia*" (or "*ecclesia*") is used 115 times in the NT, and can be analysed as follows:

- ◆ The Universal Church 12 times
- ◆ The Local Church 60 times
- ◆ Local Churches 35 times
- ◆ Other Usage 28 times

Here are some of the terminologies used in the Bible to describe the church. Perhaps you can think of others?

- ♦ **Body:** primarily the universal church
- ♦ **Temple:** cornerstones, foundations, bricks
- ♦ **Household:** clearly defined membership, privileges, discipline, responsibilities, orderliness, shared resources, leadership
- ♦ **Lamp stand:** light, oil, separately accountable to Christ
- ♦ **Field (or Garden):** ploughing, sowing, cultivating, fertilising, protecting, pruning, harvesting, tares
- ♦ **Vine:** No life apart from Christ, discipline and pruning, possibility of being lost, fruitfulness, answered prayer
- ♦ **Bride:** submission to Christ, Christ's love of the church, Christ nourishing and caring for the church
- ♦ **Flock:** need for a shepherd, analogy of sheep, under-shepherds
- ♦ **Army:** warfare, battle, formation, strategy, conquest, victory

Church is not an afterthought of God. We are not here just to bide our time until the "glory cloud appears". Church is the divine instrument God has chosen to display His glory to the earth.

Jesus Christ is Lord

In order to understand God's plan and to see it effective in action, we must understand certain spiritual and biblical premises about church. All power resides with the head. Jesus Christ is not just the head of the church. **All Authority** rests with Jesus Christ.

Matt 28:18; Dan 7:13,14; Matt 11:27-30; Rom 14:9; Col 1:13-23

There are three divinely ordained structure or institutions in this world of authority and covering:

- ♦ **The Government** (Rom 13:1,2; Tit 3:1,2; 1 Pet 2:13-15,18,19)
- ♦ **The Family** (Eph 5:22-33; 6:1-4; Col 3:18-21; 1 Pet 3:1-9)
- ♦ **The Church** (Heb 13:17; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22,23)

When we understand and accept God's ordained authority structures for this world, and how spiritual authority is an integral part of this them, we can begin to work with Him instead of against Him in order to see lost people won to Christ, and the kingdom of God established and extended in the earth.

THE CHURCH IS TOUGH AND INDESTRUCTIBLE

THE CHURCH HAS DOMINION

The Church Dominates Satan - and has Dominion over him!

Picture the scene - Jesus with a group of fishermen, tax collectors, publicans and peasants. Twelve men, one under suspicion. He promises to turn them into a body tougher than the proverbial **"gates of hell"** (Matt 16:18)!

The term "gates of hell" was a common idiom in the Greek world. Today we might say "mighty as a nuclear weapon" or "deadlier than a patriot missile". When a Greek wanted to express irresistible, invincible force, he could think of nothing stronger than the **gates of hell**.

According to Ken Chant of Vision Bible College, Jesus' statement could therefore be reasonably interpreted this way:

"Until now you have known nothing mightier than the gates of hell ... but I am about to create a new thing, My Church, against which the gates of hell will be as impotent as a paper sword against granite".

Satan is real, active and malevolent. He is a thief, a murderer and a liar (John 10:10), who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet 5:6-11). Submission to God, coupled to resistance towards evil (Jam 4:17) is the only path to true spiritual victory.

Christ has given us authority to crush our enemy under our feet. No matter how cunning Satan's plans, how wicked his designs, how dreadful his power, how immense his resources. His efforts will ultimately be in vain.

Spiritual health, spiritual power, personal fulfilment, prosperity and blessing, mastery over Satan - all of these arise from close fellowship with the Church of Jesus Christ, and from active participation in its worship, and in its witness.

Notice carefully that the promise of Christ is that **the gates of hell** cannot prevail against **the Church He is building**. Any other church, whether a particular denomination, an independent local assembly, or a gathering of disaffected believers, may fail if it has ceased to be a true expression of the church of Jesus Christ, or if it was never built by Him!

In Biblical days governors, councillors and judges often held court near the gates of a city. Gates therefore became synonymous with government and authority (eg London, Washington, Canberra). In the same way the Church is synonymous with authority in the Spirit.

Luke 10:17-20; Mark 16:17,18; Col 2:13-15

Here then is the secret of personal triumph. The logic is irrefutable:

**"Those who belong to an invincible church
will themselves be invincible! ...
... The more closely you are bound to this church,
the more you will share in its divine strength"**