

II. Church and Church Order in Primitive Christianity

Opening Questions:

(1) What is the leadership structure within your church? Do you have a single pastor? Elders? Deacons? Deaconesses? Paid staff members (ordained or unordained)?

(2) Does your church have any formal relation to other churches? If so, is there a person who

- oversees churches in a given region (e.g. a bishop or superintendent) or
- has an itinerant ministry that keeps churches in connection with one another (e.g. the "apostolic" figure within certain British and American charismatic church networks)?

(3) How closely do leadership structures currently used by your church match the kind of leadership structures used in the early Christian texts you have read for this week? Where are the points of similarity? Where are the points of difference? Why do these differences exist?

The NT ordinarily speaks of "the church in" a certain city (Jerusalem, Corinth, etc.)

This church often turns out to be "the church in" someone's house, e.g.

- Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila (cf. Acts 18:1-4); Rom. 16:5 (in Rome); 1 Cor. 16:19 (in Ephesus; cf. Acts 18:19-19);
- Nympha: Col. 4:15 (in Laodicea?)
- Apphia and Archippus (Philm. 2).

It is interesting to note the role of women in hosting and leading these churches, e.g. Nympha (Col. 4:5) and Priscilla (mentioned before Aquila, contrary to the expected practice, in Rom. 16:5).

In considering how these churches worshipped, evangelized and helped one another to grow spiritually, we will need to look at how leadership was organized to facilitate this.

It needs to be said at the outset that the way leadership, power and authority functioned in early Christian communities was very different from both

- the way that the surrounding cultures of the ancient world thought about formally recognized religious leadership and
- the way our own culture thinks about leadership, power and authority.

Leadership in the early church was organized around the working of the Spirit, which created

- supernatural spiritual gifts in the members of the church;
- various supernatural teaching gifts, which
 - were discerned by the church and
 - became the basis for a shared (collegial) ministry based on common prayer, which
 - built up the whole body of the church and
 - helped members of the body grow into maturity, so that they could exercise their own spiritual gifts wisely and with charity.

- The early Christians assumed that **the local church must have a *plural* ministry in which all believers have a part and which is based upon a diversity of spiritual gifts that need to be discerned and nurtured.**

The NT thus presupposes a model of leadership quite different from that found in competing religions of the Greco-Roman world.

Most of the religions that competed with Christianity in the Hellenistic world believed that religion was a matter of rituals conducted by either a **religious specialist** (the ancient version of the “professional”) or civic officials to turn away the anger of the gods or secure the gods' favor.

- The person who presided at the sacrifice was a person who
 - had a **special status**,
 - **provided what was needed and**
 - **did virtually all of what needed to be done.**

For the early Christian communities,

- the only person who had this superior status of being a *mediator* and bringing about peace between man and God was Jesus.
- **The Spirit poured out by Jesus after his Resurrection**
 - **created some new, very different human leadership structures which**
 - **were based on plural leadership** (not the leadership of a single religious specialist) and
 - **did not depend upon**
 - **specialized rituals or techniques or**
 - **rigidly hierarchical structures** (i.e. priest vs. client relationships).

I. Gifts of the Spirit and Leadership in Biblical Theology

A. OT: In the Old Testament, God by His Spirit, appoints and empowers certain individuals to lead his people for the benefit of the whole nation (cf. Num. 27:18 [Joshua]; 1 Sam. 10:6,10 [Saul]; Jer. 1:4-9 [Jeremiah]). Nonetheless, in the Old Testament, the nature of the Spirit and its role in calling, appointing and equipping individuals for leadership was not systematically developed.

B. NT: The apostolic Church conceived of the spiritual gifts as **supernatural capacities that were radically dependent upon Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and therefore restricted to believers:**

- The Spirit Rests Upon the Son:** The Spirit is given to the Servant of the Lord (Is. 42:1 and 61:1), the Messianic figure with whom Jesus is identified in the NT (Mt. 3:16/Mk. 1:10-11/Lk. 3:21-22/Jn. 1:32-33; Lk. 4:18-19; Acts 10:38)
- Jesus Gives His Followers Spiritual Authority So That They Can Engage in Evangelization and Ministry:** During his earthly ministry, Jesus gives supernatural gifts to his followers (Lk. 10:19-20; Mt. 10:8).
- After His Resurrection**
 - Jesus Gives the Spirit to His Followers and**

ii) **This Becomes the Source and Basis for the Church's Life and Ministries**

- (1) Jesus pours out the Spirit on the apostles (1:8; 2:4) and everyone who repents and is baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins (compare Acts 2:17-18,33,38-39,41 with 9:17-18 and 10:36,38,42-48; see also Tit. 3:5-6).
- (2) Through the Spirit, Christ bestows gifts on the people who acknowledge him to be Lord and are baptized in his name (see Eph. 4:3-8,11-13, esp. *vv. 5,7-8]).

The etymology and use of the word “gift” show that it is a supernatural work of the Spirit in believers:

The word used for spiritual “gift” here is χάρισμα [charisma].

- This is based on the Greek root word χάρις [charis], which in non-Christian Greek meant “favor” (often in a political context; winning someone’s favor as a means to personal advancement, e.g. obtaining a political office).
- In Christian Greek, χάρις [charis] refers to the unmerited (unearned) favor that God shows in calling and saving sinners through the person and work of His Son.
 - The ending -μα (-ma) indicates something that is a product of some process or activity, so χάρισμα (charisma=“gift”) would be **what is produced in us when God shows us his unmerited favor (pours out His grace upon us)**.
 - Cf. also v. 6b, where instead of *charisma* (gift=product of grace), Paul uses *energema* (something produced or effected by God as an outworking of his grace.)
[Cf. the early Christian idea that the gifts are given by God at the point of conversion/baptism]

The idea of the **gift** as **something created by unmerited divine grace rather than a natural ability** should be kept in mind in reading Paul's epistles

- Rom. 12:6: "we have different **gifts** (charismata), **according to the grace** (charis) given us"
- all the different gifts have the same origin in the same divine Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-6): “There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one” (1 Cor. 12:11).
- 1 Cor. 4:7: since the spiritual gift is not a natural ability or personal achievement, all pride and boasting are inappropriate (compare Rom. 12:3-6).
- Mt. 10:8: Gifts freely received are to be used for the benefit of others.

Spiritual Gifts as Supernatural Capacities Rather Than Natural Abilities

When Paul speaks of a “spiritual gift”, he was therefore **not** thinking of a natural ability that was in some way already evident and available prior to conversion and the receiving of God’s Spirit.

- According to Paul, the unregenerate person (i.e. the person who has not received new life from Jesus Christ) does not have the Spirit and therefore is unable to accept or receive the things that come from the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14).
- In Rom. 8: 5-11 (note esp. v. 9), Paul distinguishes between

- (1) the unregenerate person who is controlled by the sinful nature and cannot please God and
- (2) the person who has received Jesus Christ and is indwelt by the Spirit of God.

C. Spiritual gifts are intrinsically connected with the spiritual and moral advance of the congregation and the individuals who are a part of it

(1) In Paul's letters, **spiritual gifts are given to the Church for the common good** (1 Cor. 12:7) **so that the whole body may be strengthened** (1 Cor. 14:26), edified (=built up; 1 Cor. 14:4-5,12) encouraged (1 Cor. 14:31) **and grow into spiritual maturity** (Eph. 4:15-16).

All these gifts are

- **distributed according to God's will and purpose** and
- **equally necessary** (cf. the analogy of the parts of the body in 1 Cor. 12:12ff. in which each part is connected with all the others and essential for the good of the whole) **if the Church is to be healthy** (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 7:17; *12:4-11;27-30; Eph. *4:11-13,15-16; Heb. 2:4; 1 Pet. 4:10-11)

When spiritual gifts are neglected (1 Tim. 4:14), they are of no use to anyone.

Spiritual gifts

- **must be desired, sought, and cultivated** ("fanned into flame") and
- **should be formally discerned and recognized by the leaders of the community and supported by their prayers** (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6-7; compare 1 Tim. 5:22; Ac. 6:6; 13:3; 14:23)

Spiritual gifts are also of little use when exercised

- **without a spiritual maturity that includes discernment and love for others** (Rom. 12:5-9; 1 Cor. 13:1-3; 14:1)
- **with a hard and uncharitable attitude that resists repentance.**
 - "But in us the gifts are often like furled sails so that they cannot spread or yield to the force of the wind. The...gifts are tied and knotted by a host of venial sins, scarcely conscious, which fasten our souls to external things and to our own egotism. Then our course is not directed by the Holy Ghost, but by ourselves, by our reason which clings to its own judgment unconfirmed to the judgment of God; it is directed by our will, tenacious of self-will, inordinate self-love and caprice. Hence, although in a state of grace, we hardly live under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost...and we...confuse our impulsiveness with the inspirations of the gift of counsel. And this procedure assuredly does not suffice to resist the profound errors of the present day nor to re-ascend after such a descent, nor to discover the unity of life amid the multiplicity and complexity of insoluble questions, without the grace of God" (Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace*, p. 499).

(2) Because **one's ability to discover and use one's gifts is intrinsically linked with and proportional to one's spiritual growth,**

- **an assessment of a person's**
 - **spiritual maturity and**
 - **regular participation in spiritual disciplines that promote dependence upon God****should be considered before putting them into any ministry situation.**
- This point is often neglected or misunderstood in contemporary teaching/programs on spiritual gifts.

Some gifts have an especially important role and deserve special respect (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1), namely **speaking gifts** which edify the body and agree with the apostolic teaching (1 Cor. 14:37; cf. 14:3-12, 28-31)

II. Paul's Concept of Spiritual Gifts and the Call to Teach and Lead the Church

A. Although All Gifts Are Important and Necessary, Some Gifts Are Pre-Eminent (Especially Important In Building Up the Body and Helping Its Members Advance To Spiritual Maturity)

From an examination of 1 Cor. 12 and 14 (see esp. 12:31 and 14:1), it is clear that Paul thinks **speaking gifts are especially important and deserve special respect because of the critical role they play in helping others progress toward greater understanding and greater spiritual maturity**. [Cf. Basil *Comm. in Is.*, proem. 2: "The gift of teaching, then, is for the building up of the hearers."]

- Most of these are gifts that involve **speaking with authority about God, Christ and the Gospel**, e.g. apostles, prophets, teachers, message of wisdom, message of knowledge, etc. (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching")
- The gifts of healing and miraculous powers are also mentioned both in 12:9-10 and 12:28, probably because they confirm that what is said is true and are therefore associated with the faith (12:9) that arises in response to what is said.

B. Oversight of the church requires both

- **the speaking gifts** necessary to teach the apostolic faith: 1 Tim. 3:1-2; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; Tit. 1:9; 2:1 and
- **a call or appointment by the Holy Spirit to teach and care for the church** (Acts 20:28)

This is ordinarily connected with a setting apart for sacred service by the laying on of hands (Num. 8:10; 1Tim. 5:22) **with a recognition that the Spirit is present and at work in the person set apart** (Num. 27:18; Dt. 34:9; 2 Tim. 1:6-7 with 1 Tim. 4:14; cf. Acts 6:3,6--how precisely to understand the relationship between the laying on of hands, the gift and the action of the Spirit in these texts??)

The earliest Christians thus believed that the church should be structured around a recognition that

- **every person who is in Christ has at least one spiritual gift and**
- **an important task of the pastoral team is to see that**
 - **the individual's gift is properly discerned and that**
 - **the individual becomes sufficiently mature to properly use the gift God has given him or her.**

The question for them then was not (as it often is today) how a single ministerial professional can frantically staff church programs with volunteers, but rather how the whole teaching team can work together to help all the members of the congregation to grow in faith,

- properly discerning their gifts and
- exercising their gifts in a mature way so that the church can have a clear vision of its mission and grow and flourish,
- in time equipping others to exercise these same gifts (2 Tim. 2:2: Paul had equipped Timothy; now Timothy was to equip others)
- selecting people who can work well together in ministry and building a sense of order, direction, purpose and loyalty that is necessary if the members of Christ's body are to work together effectively

For the earliest Christians, the challenge of ministry was not so much whether we can publicly demonstrate our own professional competence, but whether we can discern and fan into flame the spiritual gifts of others, so that they can come to lead alongside us and assume responsibility for the spiritual care of the community when we are gone.

- On this see Acts 20:18-35 [Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus] and 1 Pet. 5:1-3, where Peter does not refer to his own authority as an apostle but appeals to the elders as a fellow elder [*sumpresbuteros*], urging them to continue to care for and nurture Christ's flock.)

The Organization of the Christian Community (Church Order) from the New Testament to the Early Third Century

Questions:

(1) List all the titles/positions used in reference to church/ministry leadership positions in the New Testament.

(a) What are the distinctive or defining features of each title/position listed (to the extent that this can be determined or inferred)?

(b) Which of these titles/positions seem to overlap or are possibly identical with one another? Why?

(2) Is it possible to see a progression in these titles/positions from unstructured/charismatic to structured/institutional church order (as Volz and Marksches, in different ways, argue)?

- (a) In the material you have read, do you find the arguments of Sohm and Harnack (Volz, pp. 18-19) regarding the transition from the apostle-prophet-teacher model to the bishop-presbyter(elder)-deacon model helpful in reflecting upon the development of church order?
- (3) In what ways do these positions change in nature or in name from the beginning of the second century to the beginning of the third century?
- (4) How fluid and purely functional are the positions/titles which appear in the earliest accounts of church order?
- (5) What positions/titles emerge in the second and third centuries which are not explicitly attested in the New Testament?

Note especially that the terms elder (*presbuteros*) and overseer or “bishop” (*episkopos*) were originally applied to the same class of people. The “elders” mentioned in Acts 20:17 are also called “overseers” in v. 28 (compare also the use of “elders” in Tit. 1:5 and “overseer” in v. 7). The elders in 1 Tim. 5:17 and 1 Pet. 5:1-3 are also charged with oversight of the congregation and the tasks normally associated with such oversight. Thus, in Acts 14:23 we see that Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church, but in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:1-8, Paul addresses the overseers and deacons (servants) as comprehensive of the church leadership, which again apparently presumes the identity of the elder and the overseer/bishop.

It is likely that the term “shepherd”/pastor (*poimen*) also refers to the same class of persons (cf. Acts 20, etc.)

The qualifications of an overseer/elder/pastor are set forth principally in 1 Tim. 3:1-7; note the emphasis on how one routinely deals with people (avoidance of anti-social tendencies which produce unedifying conflict; praise of qualities which commend the Gospel to those in the broader society).

The principal responsibilities of the elder/overseer are to

- watch over the flock entrusted to their charge (1 Pet. 5:2)
- teach publicly and privately (see Acts 20, where Paul offers his own conduct as a model to the elders of the Church at Ephesus)
- visit the sick (James 5:14)

Note that plural eldership (not single eldership) is normative in the early Christian period. There is no “one-man ministry” in the New Testament.

The tasks assigned to the “servant”/deacon (*diakonos*) are less clearly defined, since the term is used to refer to an office in the Church only in 1 Tim. 3:8ff., Phil. 1:1 (greeting of the church leadership) and Rom. 16:1 (Phoebe). The term is not found in Tit. 1, nor is it used of the Seven in Acts 6 (even though a laying on of hands is mentioned in v. 6 of that chapter).

Presumably the deacons assisted the elders by visiting and extending assistance (possibly including financial assistance; see 1 Tim. 3:8b) to the needy and the sick (perhaps also, as required, offering instruction and assisting in the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as at later periods in the Church).

It has been debated whether 1 Tim. 3:11 intends to discuss women as deacons or whether the reference there is simply to the wives of the deacons.

- In favor of the former interpretation, John Chrysostom compares 1 Tim. 3:11 with Rom. 16:1 (Phoebe recognized as a deacon/servant of the Church, perhaps functioning as an apostolic legate in delivering Paul's letter to the Roman church) and then identifies this role with that of the widows subsequently mentioned in 1 Tim. 5. In support of this view, it has also been noted that there is no article before "women" (*gunaikas*), which would normally be required if the text was to be translated "wives," and that *hosautos* ("in the same way") is here used to introduce a new category of church leader, just as it does in v. 8 (for male deacons). This would also explain why *pistas en pasin* (faithful/trustworthy in all things) would be made a requirement of the women referred to here (just as comprehensive ethical requirements are asserted for other persons entrusted with congregational leadership).
- After end of fourth century, office of deaconess goes into decline and disappears, although it probably lasts in Syria until the beginning of the sixth century.

Note also the prominence of the prophetic office (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11) in the primitive church up until 130 A.D. This declines in the middle of the second century and is to some extent treated with suspicion during the fallout from the Montanist crisis in the late second century A.D., although prophetic speech and visions continue to be a prominent feature of individual piety, particularly in the case of martyrs, ascetics and monks, throughout the early Christian period and into the Byzantine period.

**Note also the transition from oversight by multiple teaching elders to oversight by single regular teacher of the whole church (overseer/bishop/pastor) working at first with a group of presbyters/elders who provide council (but no longer teach the whole congregation on a regular basis), then later without the group of presbyters but with the support of deacons and deaconesses.

**Bishop also later comes to be regional overseer, while pastors of local churches are called presbyters/elders.