

The First Century Church – The Organization and Discipline of the Church - Part 2

Introduction: We have already considered the offices/ministries of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors (elders, overseers). In this lesson we will study the offices/ministries of teachers and deacons; how church leaders and workers are selected, appointed and removed; the autonomy of local congregations under Christ, and the subjects, purpose and procedure of church discipline.

1. Christ set in the first century church five teaching offices (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) and one office of physical service and administration (deacons). The two remaining offices we have not studied are:
 - A. Teachers - Ephesians 4:11; compare Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28, 29. The scriptures tell us little about this function, but it seems that "teachers" in Ephesians 4:11 were men who were not elders, evangelists, etc., but who knew the scriptures, led holy lives, and were capable of assisting the elders and evangelists in carrying the teaching load in the church.
 - B. Deacons - 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Philippians 1:1; Acts 6:1-6.
 - 1) A Deacon is from a Greek word which simply means a servant. This is not a teaching ministry, although some New Testament deacons were also able to teach and one later became known as an evangelist - Acts 6:5-15; 7:1-60; 8:5-13, 26-40; 21:8. Deacons served in material and physical tasks and administration so as to free the other leaders for prayer and the ministry of the word - Acts 6:1-6. Such physical and administrative tasks today might include benevolent work, building care, business and financial matters, administration and much more.
 - 2) Deacons, like elders, had necessary qualifications to meet - 1 Timothy 3:8-13.
 - 3) Deacons were ordained by an evangelist - 1 Timothy 3:8-13.
2. Scriptural principles for the selection, ordination, and removal of church officers.
 - A. Every new congregation of the first century church was organized with its own elders and deacons as soon as there were Christians mature enough to qualify for these works - Titus 1:5; Acts 13:13--14:23; Philippians 1:1. But not before - 1 Timothy 5:22.
 - B. Officers should be selected by the church after the church has been informed and taught thoroughly about the necessary qualifications. This principle was followed in the selection of the first deacons (Acts 6:1-6) and shows us the mind of the Spirit about selecting officers. (Note: Where there are already existing elders and they want to add to their number, the existing elders, because of their responsibility for the welfare of the flock, probably should have a part along with the congregation in the nomination of new candidates. But the congregation should have full freedom to approve or reject any candidate. The church will follow best those leaders in whom it has confidence. This is why the church is to choose its leaders).
 - C. After selection, the names of the candidates should be put before the congregation for a stated period before ordination, and the members given full opportunity to bring up any reason why a candidate should not be ordained. This is inferred from the requirement that deacons "also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach" - 1 Timothy 3:10. This wisdom would apply in principle to any office of leadership.

- D. Ordination in the early church was performed by the "laying of hands" after prayer and fasting - Acts 14:23; 13:2,3; 6:6; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22.
 - E. Since the congregation chooses elders and deacons to be ordained, it logically follows that it can also ask for the resignation or removal of elders or deacons who abuse their office or do not serve well. Since the evangelist ordains elders and is to deal with the misconduct of elders - Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:19-21 - it would seem to be his duty to formally remove a sinful elder at the request of the congregation.
3. The New Testament church had no earthly headquarters - John 4:20-24. Each local congregation was autonomous under Christ, having its own elders.
- A. The conference on circumcision was held at Jerusalem not because Jerusalem was the worldly headquarters of the church but because the teachers who disturbed the church came from Jerusalem - Acts 15:1-29, especially verses 1,2,24.
 - B. The Gentile churches sent offerings for the poor to Jerusalem not because Jerusalem was headquarters but because the needy were there - Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8, 9. If the severe need had been somewhere else, help would have been sent there instead.
 - C. The church at Antioch, not Jerusalem, sent Paul on his three great missionary tours, and he reported back to Antioch - Acts 13:1-3; 14:26-28; 15:40, 41; 18:22, 23.
 - D. The lack of worldly super-organization creates a weak and foolish system as the world thinks, but it makes the church much more powerful and efficient for God's spiritual purposes - 2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 Corinthians 1:27-29; 2:14.
4. New Testament principles of church discipline
- A. Church discipline is strongly related to evangelism, because the beauty and holiness of the bride of Christ is what first draws the lost to Christ. Hypocrisy among Christians is the ugliest thing the world sees when it looks at the church. Discipline involves shepherding, teaching, guidance and prevention of falling as well as removing sinful members from the fellowship. Disfellowship is a last resort. It will rarely be necessary where alert shepherding is practiced before problems have time to grow.
 - B. Scriptural reasons for disfellowshipping/excommunicating a member:
 - 1) An unrepented wrong against a brother - Matthew 18:15-17.
 - 2) Immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, swindling, and other such gross sins - 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, especially vv. 11-13.
 - 3) Causing dissension, stumbling and division - Romans 16:17, 18 (note context in chapters 14, 15).
 - 4) Disorderly, undisciplined, lazy and unruly lifestyle - 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (This passage may not involve the same degree of disfellowship as the others listed).
 - 5) False or divisive teaching - 2 John 7-11; Titus 3:10, 11.

C. The purposes of disfellowshipping a member:

- 1) To bring him to repentance and save his soul if possible - 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 1:19, 20.
- 2) To protect the rest of the membership from a corrupting influence and cause them to fear God - 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 1 Timothy 5:19, 20; Acts 5:1-11.
- 3) To protect our witness of the gospel (people will not listen if the church does not live what it preaches) - Philippians 2:14, 15; Romans 2:21-24.

D. The procedure for discipline:

- 1) Wherever possible, offenses should be dealt with at an early level before they become generally public - Matthew 18:15-18.
- 2) The offender should always be approached with humility, gentleness and love but also with firmness. Our pride, arrogance and anger will only put him on the defensive and close doors to repentance - Galatians 6:1,2; 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15; 2 Timothy 2:24-26.
- 3) All facts should be carefully established, including the offender's responses to early levels of discipline - Matthew 18:15-18; 2 Corinthians 13:1, 2; 1 Timothy 5:19, 20.
- 4) Disfellowshipping should be carried out by the whole church assembled and with mourning, not arrogance - 1 Corinthians 5:2, 4, 5; 2 Corinthians 12:21. (The elders must proceed carefully and secure a united approach by the whole congregation so that the discipline will be effective and so that the church will not be divided for and against the offender. The elders also need to choose carefully the language used in publicizing the reason for disfellowshipping, in view of the current rash of lawsuits against churches arising out of cases of discipline.)
- 5) When a member has been formally disfellowshipped, the whole membership must stop associating (or even eating) with him except to exhort him to repent. Unless all signs of fellowship and approval are removed by the whole church, discipline will be ineffective. Those who keep associating with the offender are hindering his repentance by weakening the force of discipline - 1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15; Romans 16:17.
- 6) The action of disfellowshipping a member may draw strong relational, cultural and even legal responses. Therefore where it has to be done, the action should be bathed in prayer and conducted in humility and sobriety and discretion. At the same time, we must remember that if we lose our God-given core values of morality and truth, we lose our identity and our light. Therefore we must not allow cultural distaste or reaction to past abuses keep us from proper obedience to God in matters of discipline. God himself sets the example of redemptive discipline throughout the scriptures. Church discipline will work better when the church develops a stronger concept of membership covenant.

Conclusion: Disfellowship is always to be viewed, like amputation, as a last resort, but if it becomes necessary, it is to be applied faithfully and seriously out of love for the souls of the offender, the membership, and the outsiders who may hear the gospel. We must obey God even in duties that are unpleasant. The church must have the courage to be obedient to Christ's commands in this unpleasant

task when it is necessary. Obedience in this matter is as important as obedience in any other. The result will be righteousness and peace - Hebrews 12:5-11.

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