

Sermon: the Development of the Church and Church Leaders in the New Testament

By Bob Young

[Note: a sermon outline to survey the development of the church]

The Book of Acts: The Church Begins

The first church was established in Jerusalem, Acts 2, Day of Pentecost

This church grew in a magnificent way, soon having 1000s of members, 3000, then 5000, and upward

This church was composed of many new Christians, most of whom had previously been religious, converting from Judaism, including both Jews and proselytes.

This church was led in its early days by the apostles, but when a problem arose, probably within a few weeks, there were men ready to assume positions of leadership (Acts 6)

Those selected were spiritual men, those who identified with the problem and were able to resolve the difficulty

This selection of special servants allowed the apostles to continue their ministry or service in the word and prayer.

The Book of Acts: The Church Struggles

Acts says that the church continued to grow, despite persecution. When persecution drove the church out of Jerusalem, 6:8, 8:1-4, the church prospered. Acts 9:31, 12:24

These early chapters do not give us much information about how leadership functioned in the expanding church. The emphasis in this section is on the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles, and on certain individuals who will be an important part of the spread of the gospel in the second half of the book of Acts.

We read about the conversion of the Ethiopian, the conversion of Paul, the conversion of Cornelius, and the interaction between Saul and Barnabas in preparation for the missionary journeys.

The Book of Acts: The Church Expands

In Acts 13, the church in Antioch sends out Paul and Barnabas. They go to Cyprus, then to the area of Asia Minor, probably Galatia, and after converting many people to Jesus, and visiting these cities again, they appointed elders in every city, 14:23.

How long had these new leaders been Christians? Were those converted limited to those with previous religious experience, those who became Christians out of Judaism, or were some of these new leaders Gentiles? Certainly the second option is at least possible. How long should a church exist after it is beginning before it has designated leaders? Should it have to go through 10 or 20 or more years without a group of capable, spiritual leaders? How long should the leadership rest only the minister or evangelist? Can we not see and know the problems of only one leader?

In the first half of the book of Acts, we have a summary of the first 15-20 years of the church, up until about 50 A.D. In Acts 15 we learn that the Jerusalem church had elders, but we do not know when they began serving. The churches established by Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey had elders within a few weeks or months.

The Pastoral Epistles: the Development of the Church

Much of the teaching of the NT about leadership comes from 1-2 Timothy and Titus. These letters are usually dated in the early 60s A.D. The church in Ephesus was established in 52-53, after Paul had stayed in Corinth almost two years in 50-51 A.D. (Acts 18). Paul spent three years in Ephesus on the second missionary journey (Acts 19). This event can be dated around 53-56 A.D. The church in Ephesus was firmly established during this time, and we know that there were elders in the church in Ephesus in Acts 20. This was likely within a year (more or less) after Paul left Ephesus in Acts 19. Additional details of Paul's journeys during this time are outlined in the first few chapters of 2 Corinthians.

When Paul wrote Timothy about church leadership, it was not in preparation to establish elders, because the church already had elders. It was to strengthen and encourage the leaders, and to make certain that the church understood the nature of spiritual leadership, so that they would correct problems and difficulties and choose the right kind of leaders.