

Authentic Church?

Introduction

The Church is the family of God, the people of God, and often, as with families we tend to take it for granted. We complain when it doesn't suit us, but ignore it when things go well. But, as with every family it takes skill and understanding from all who are a part of it to make it work well. Yet the Church is much more than a family and much more exciting. The Church is unique in this world and in the next, there is nothing like it.

It is our privilege as Christians to be a part of the Church, but what is it? Not everybody is a part of the Church: who are we? And what are the distinctive characteristics of the Church; what makes it different? Why should it be different? What is true Church, what makes it authentic, biblical?

This study looks at these questions. First of all, it is vital to realise our identity. We can't live up to who we are unless we know who we are. How can we do what the Church should do unless we know God's will for His Church? How can we channel our activities unless we know how God has ordered His creation and His people. When we understand these things, then we will be able to apply them to how we live out our lives as part of the Church of Christ.

This study will concentrate on four aspects of the Church: Identity, Actions & Objectives, Organisation, and Application to the local fellowship.

Identity

Who is the Church?

Each of us has an understanding of who we are based on our family and upbringing. For some, this sense of identity is very strong – for example with the royal family, for others it is perhaps something they wish to play down. When we become Christians we gain a new identity, a new sense of who we are and a new sense of where we belong and to whom we belong. The extent to which we understand this new position governs the extent to which we can partake in the kingdom to which we now belong. As in a family, identity depends on relationships. It is our new relationship with Christ, and through Christ with God that matters to us as believers, and as the Church.

In Christ

Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ is the rock on which Jesus said He would build His Church.¹ This is the foundation for both our understanding of Church and our actions as part of the Church. The apostle Paul speaks of there being only one foundation which can be laid and built upon which is the Lord Jesus Christ.² It is because of Jesus and what He has done that we are privileged to be part of God's family, God's people.³ Who we are and what we are is because of who and what Christ is – we rest on His merits. But although they are His merits, they belong to us!⁴ Our life is hidden with Christ in God, we are inseparable!⁵

Chosen in Christ

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world!⁶ God has plans for us which have been drawn up from before He even began to build the universe – that says something about the security which we have in Christ. God's intention is our confidence! God wants us, chose us, has demonstrated His love for us and is coming back to fulfil His promises!

Redeemed in Christ

In Christ we have redemption through His blood.⁷ We lost that free relationship with God when Adam sinned; we broke free from God. Redemption speaks of buying back, of paying for something of value. God made us; He also paid the cost of our sin in giving His own Son to die for us. Our value in God's eyes is demonstrated by what He was willing to give to gain us!⁸ Not only has God paid the price to gain our forgiveness and a right relationship with Him, but one day that relationship will be consummated when Christ returns to claim His purchased possession, the Church!⁹

Sanctified in Christ

Sanctified is a technical term which seems to have lost its value, it really is the Latin version of a Greek word which comes to us as 'holy'. In other words, 'sanctified' and 'holy' both mean the same thing – set apart, different in a special sort of a way. We are set apart because God has chosen us – this is the main distinction between the Church and the rest of the world. But being set apart by God for God implies becoming like God. We were chosen "that we should be holy and without blame before Him."¹⁰ God's plan and purpose for us is to make us like Himself – He is grooming us to be fit for His kingdom!

¹ Matthew 16:13-19

² 1 Corinthians 3:11

³ 1 John 3:1

⁴ Ephesians 1:3

⁵ Colossians 3:3-4

⁶ Ephesians 1:4

⁷ Ephesians 1:7

⁸ Romans 5:8

⁹ Ephesians 1:14

¹⁰ Ephesians 1:4

Body of Christ

The Bible explicitly states that the Church is the body of Christ and that Christ is the head.¹¹ This indicates the unity, but not the uniformity of the Church. 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 show the diversity within the body of Christ, whilst making clear that all the members of the body are working towards the same goal. There should be no competition in the Church, just **complimentation**! In other words, each member of the body does what it does best to make the whole body work as Christ the Head intends. Each member's gifts compliment those of the others. A congregation entirely comprised of preachers would have problems, as would a fellowship full of nothing but givers!

Bride of Christ

The Bible also speaks of the Church as the Bride of Christ.¹² As such we have much to look forward to – the return of the Bridegroom, the marriage supper of the Lamb and the ongoing relationship of Christ with His Church. It is little wonder that “the Spirit and the bride say ‘Come’”.¹³ It is this expectant hope in Christ that binds us together and gives us our purpose on earth.

Glory of Christ

It is astounding to think that we, the Church are Christ's glory! This does not mean that we have anything glorious of ourselves, but rather that Jesus in His grace has chosen to make His glory known through us, not only in this world, but also to the principalities and powers in the heavenlies! God has chosen to reveal the good news of the Gospel, the manifold wisdom of God through His redeemed people – that's you and I!¹⁴

What is the Church?

If **who** the Church is speaks of our identity, then **what** the Church is shows the nature of the Church, the fabric.

Assembly

The word for church¹⁵ in the New Testament means literally an assembly, a gathering together. As such, it is not the building itself which is the Church, rather the people who come together. We can't come to church, but the Church comes together! Very often we get caught up in the actual building – there is nothing special about the place where we meet, it's the people who meet who are special!

Living stones in a Spiritual House

¹¹ Colossians 1:24, Ephesians 1:22-23, 1 Corinthians 12:27

¹² Revelation 19:7

¹³ Revelation 22:17

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:12, 3:10-11

¹⁵ 'ekklésia' – from which comes the English word 'ecclesiastical'

Authentic Church?

Although there is no physical building, we are a spiritual building¹⁶. This is not some inanimate object, but a living, growing temple in which God chooses to dwell by His Spirit!¹⁷ What a concept, that God lives in us, not just individually, but as a body of people He chooses to make Himself present and known in us! Christ is the cornerstone – without Him it would not exist. This structure is something that endures forever.

Spirit filled

From the time of Pentecost the Church of Christ has been in a special way the habitation of God. Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit had come upon them.¹⁸ The power came from God. Unless God is at work in the Church it is powerless. Just as our identity comes from our relationship to God, our ability and power to do God's will comes from His indwelling of the Church by His Spirit. Without Him we are nothing and can do nothing.¹⁹

Witnesses

As God's people, in whom He lives we are to be His witnesses. This is generally seen as something we do, but it is primarily what we are. A witness will preach the Gospel and evangelise, but the very fact of who and what we are is a witness, a testimony to who God is and to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ! Before we ever do anything as believers, we are a living testimony to all creation in heaven and earth of God's goodness and grace!

What are the characteristics of the Church?

The Church has a distinct identity and nature how does that show itself?

Joy

Our relationship with God is what gives a deep down joy. Knowing who we are in Christ, what He has done for us, the hope that we have should make us the happiest people on earth. Jesus is joyful because of what He has done, and He intends that we share in that joy.²⁰

Holiness

Being different in a special way means that we should be obviously different from the rest of the world. Holiness as a characteristic is just that. People should see by our attitudes and actions that we are being made like Christ. The most obvious evidence of this will be our love.²¹

¹⁶ 1 Peter 2:5

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:19-22

¹⁸ Acts 1:8

¹⁹ 1 Peter 2:9-10

²⁰ John 15:11

²¹ John 13:34-35

Fruit

Love is the motivation; fruit is the result of that motivation being put in action. Just as an apple tree is known because of its apples, we should be known because the Church bears fruit – souls saved, believers encouraged, the poor and needy helped. Another way of putting it is that the Church should make a difference wherever it is, whatever culture or environment the Church should be growing, reproducing. Jesus' commission to the disciples was to go and make disciples of all nations, echoing God's command to Adam and again to Noah to go and multiply. A church without fruit is failing in its primary purpose.

Actions & Objectives

What does the Church do?

Objectives

Finding the target

In order to do what God wants us to do we must first establish God's will, God's plans and purpose for His people. Often, as Christians we tend to do first, and then try to justify what we do from God's Word. This is the wrong way round, and leads to Churches attempting to defend unbiblical practises just because they work. Very often, it is a lack of understanding of God's Word which prompts aimless action in the first place.

Of course, any consideration of God's goals for His Church must be taken in the light of our identity in Christ. It is because of who we are that we do what we do. It is on the basis of our belonging to God forever that we live our lives in the here and now.

Taking aim

Our target then must be a biblical one, so where do we start? The key question is one of purpose. We are told in Ephesians that we who have first put our hope in Christ should be "to the praise of His glory".²² Again in Ephesians we are told that God's eternal purpose for us is to make His wisdom known by the Church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.²³ Paul's prayer is that God would be glorified in the Church, by Christ Jesus.²⁴ All that God has done for us reveals His glory. Our actions as well as our identity should point to God and not to us – as John the Baptist said: "He must increase, but I must decrease".²⁵ In all that we do, our eyes must be on Him and not ourselves: "All things were created through Him and **for** Him".²⁶

²² Ephesians 1:12

²³ Ephesians 3:10,11

²⁴ Ephesians 3:21

²⁵ John 3:30

²⁶ Colossians 1:16

The weapon

When Jesus was asked to summarise the entire law, He chose to hang it on two primary commands: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and ... you shall love your neighbour as yourself."²⁷ In saying this, Jesus was very much aware that both these commands had God at their centre. We can only truly love others when we love them for Christ's sake.²⁸ The means by which we glorify God is to love, because He is love.²⁹ To love then is to imitate God, to glorify Him in our lives.

Our actions then must be the outworking of God's love poured out in our lives; our aim to fulfil His purpose for us is to love God and in loving God to love others. These actions fall into three main categories:

- Worship – our Godward acts
- Edification – our actions to one another in the Church, and
- Evangelism – our world facing acts

Worship

As we look towards God there are two areas we need to consider. Firstly, we are here specifically to praise God. God has planned that we offer up to Him our thanks and our adoration for **who** He is, and for **what** He has done. The Psalms are wonderful examples of how we should speak to God, both in our private prayer, and in corporate worship. Praise is telling God how good He is. He is the only Person who we can't over-estimate. The letters of the Apostle Paul are crammed full of superlatives! We can never praise God too highly! Psalm 104 is a good example: it tells God He is great, and then goes on to say why He is great. As we look at God we must realise just how great He is. We must learn to take back from the mechanics of science the beauty of a created universe, held together by God Himself for us to live in! We must learn to thank Him for the times when He has intervened in our lives for our good. We must learn to truly delight in God and God alone.³⁰

And yet this is only a part of what worship should mean to the believer. As the Samaritan woman did, we tend to associate worship with certain places and acts. Jesus' response to the Samaritan applies to us too.³¹ We are to be worshippers by nature, not by location. In other words, it is not **where** we are that governs our worshipping, but **who** we are. But we can't all divorce ourselves from reality and cloister ourselves away as monks or nuns to worship – and God doesn't intend us to.

²⁷ Matthew 22:34-40

²⁸ Matthew 25:40

²⁹ 1 John 4:8

³⁰ Psalm 34:4-8

³¹ John 4:21-24

"I appeal to you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."³²

Our entire lives should be lived looking to God, doing all that we do, whether it is through choice or by constraint (such as working for an employer) for God's pleasure and glory. Even a simple cup of water can glorify God in heaven! We must keep our eyes open to how we can present our bodies as a living sacrifice in every situation. This is our spiritual worship!

Edification

We not only need to speak out to the world at large, but as believers we must edify one another. The word 'edify' means *to build up*. As part of the family of God we are to bring one another to spiritual maturity. God's gifts to the Church included leaders for the purpose of

"the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."³³

The main purpose of believers for believers is to build up to the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ's command to the disciples in Matthew 28 was to make disciples, not just converts. To make the converts into disciples would involve "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you".³⁴

Edification itself may be broken up into three distinct areas: teaching, admonishing and encouragement. This sums up the entire Bible based process of disciple making, which Paul outlines in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Teaching shows the right path, admonishing rebukes and corrects, instruction in righteousness encourages us on the right path.

We are to be **taught** the way in which we should go. Note that in biblical terms teaching is moral in nature and not merely information. This is why Jesus commanded the disciples to *teach disciples to obey*. The first Church was noted for its devotion to the apostles' teaching.³⁵ As God's special people we are to behave in a special way – like Him! For this purpose we need to know what God is like and what He expects of us. We need to pass on God's family values. Paul commanded Timothy that what he had heard from Paul,

³² Romans 12:1 (RSV)

³³ Ephesians 4:12-13

³⁴ Matthew 28:19-20

³⁵ Acts 2:42

he was to entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others.³⁶ Biblical teaching is also authoritative – it is not an optional extra.³⁷

If there is a right way and a wrong way for the child of God to live, then there must be some means of **admonishing** the wayward. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus outlined principles for dealing with those who had sinned.³⁸ More important even than the steps to be taken over sin is Jesus' promise that when we are doing this we are administering heavenly justice and that He is there with us when we do it! Of course, we must understand the need for love and care; the purpose of admonishing is correction and **restoration**.³⁹ Admonishing is vital when done God's way, but can kill a church when done vindictively or to condemn.

We are also to encourage one another. The Hebrews⁴⁰ were told to hold fast to their hope in Christ, and seek opportunities to stir each other up to love and good works. The whole purpose of meeting together is to fire us up and encourage us. Like coals in a fire we grow cold alone, but glow brightly when placed together. Encouragement includes sharing what God has done in our lives to help those who are struggling; it involves admitting when we need help, and being willing to accept help when offered. Encouragement requires absolute honesty – how can we encourage other believers to live up to standards we can't reach? The Pharisees who laid heavy burdens on the people were not willing to lift a finger themselves⁴¹ – they looked nice on the outside, but inside were full of dead men's bones! There is no room for Phariseism in the Church.

Evangelism

Someone once said that there are only two things we can do in this world and not in the next: win souls and sin. Only one of these is a legitimate pursuit for the believer! If we are to love God through loving others, then this must be the most vital act of love for those who are without Christ. It is not the only act of love: practical care is needed too. If we are genuinely seeking to please God in our love for others, we will be able to balance present practicalities of life with the ever present reality that "he who does not believe is condemned already".⁴²

If God is glorified in His Church, then it is primarily in His act of salvation that He is glorified. We have the privilege of participating in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who are lost – the unsearchable riches of Christ!⁴³ This is the mystery of the Gospel, which was hidden until

³⁶ 2 Timothy 2:2

³⁷ 2 Corinthians 13:10; Titus 2:15

³⁸ Matthew 18:15-20

³⁹ Galatians 6:1

⁴⁰ Hebrews 10:23-25

⁴¹ Matthew 23:4,27

⁴² John 3:18

⁴³ Ephesians 3:9-10

Christ, but which has now been revealed in us. This mystery is something into which angels long to look!⁴⁴ Christ's last words to His disciples were to command them, on His authority to go and make disciples of all nations! The first step was to preach the Gospel, to make believers. There is rejoicing in heaven every time a sinner is saved – our evangelism promotes worship above!⁴⁵ That is participation in the mystery of the Gospel!

So, our proclamation of the Gospel and our practise of winning souls for Christ are the major world facing actions that the Church must take.

Summary

As we look at the major roles of the Church, it is obvious that there is much to do. Although we will look at the organisation of the Church in more detail in the next section, it is worth noting that these activities are the responsibility of the whole Church, not just a few leaders. Ephesians 4 tells us that the leaders equip the saints for the work of ministry. The leaders provide the tools for all the saints to do the work. We must consider our own attitudes to our worship, our evangelism and our edifying of the body. One of the characteristics of the Church is fruit: each one of us must examine our own lives and our own fellowships for spiritual fruit. For there to be fruit we must set our objectives and then we must take action.

It is good to attempt to clarify in our own minds what we believe God's objectives for us as individuals and as a church are. A sentence or phrase which captures the essence of our objective as a fellowship will help us to stay close to it. For example, one personal objective summary is:

To glorify God in the power of His Holy Spirit by loving God with heart, soul and mind, and by loving my neighbour as myself.

It would be a profitable exercise to write down what you believe God is calling you to do, and then try to sum it up in one sentence which you can remember.

⁴⁴ 1 Peter 1:12

⁴⁵ Luke 15:10

Organisation

How is the Church structured; how is it run?

What it is not ...

Occasionally it is helpful to define something by saying what it is not. In this case it is beneficial to rule out the things which are **not** a fundamental part of the Church which we see in the Bible in order to see what it really is. The following is intended to provoke thought rather than as a statement as to what we should or shouldn't do. So here goes ...

- The Church was never commanded to meet on Sunday, or to have a midweek Bible study.⁴⁶
- The Church has no command with regard to the type of building in which we should worship, neither does it specify whether the building should be consecrated, or even that there should be a building at all.
- The Bible makes no pronouncement on style of worship or structure of service
- We have no rules as to what translation of the Bible is to be used, nor which hymn book
- The Church is not based on a particular class, culture, race.
- Appointments to office within the Church are not based on financial status, occupation, business success, or social standing.

What should be forming in your mind is the idea that you can take away many things that we see as a normal part of the Church and yet still be left with the genuine article – the Church of Christ. Billy Strachan asked the question: "If the Holy Spirit was taken away from you church, would anybody notice?" So many churches revolve around a worldly organisation, a machine. Meetings are organised, events are planned, life goes on, even when the Spirit of God is no longer in it. The Church of God is not in the meetings or events or the hymn books. These things are a practical expression of how the Church of God is run in our culture. Go to Africa and the worship, teaching, even the timekeeping is totally different, yet it is still the Church, and it is still structured and organised.

The Church is not a machine which churns out meetings and obliges people to support them. The meetings are only there to support the function of the Church, the people, not the other way around. The Church exists, and has existed in many different cultures and ages, and it has adapted to each one. We cannot make everyone a middle class Christian just because we are (or a working class Christian, for that matter), or insist on a particular format for worship services. ***We exist to conform people to Christ, not us.***

⁴⁶ We are told not to neglect to meet together – Hebrews 10:25

This is the crucial point to understand: the Church is organised; it is structured; there must be unity, there must be conformity – the question is to what? We have already discovered that the Church is a spiritual entity – it is the body of Christ, a spiritual body, a spiritual house. The organisation of the Church must therefore be spiritual in nature.⁴⁷

The bottom line is that there is much we can take away from what we consider to be the Church, and yet still be left with the Church and the structure which God has given us. We need to start from that bottom line and build on the solid foundation.⁴⁸

We have already looked at the concept of teaching, admonishing and evangelising, and that these were core activities for the Church – these reveal the core structure of the Church which Christ has given us. The Church is organised to effectively achieve these three goals.

A Spiritual Structure

A unity as a body

As God's people we are a spiritual house⁴⁹ - a house implies order and structure. As the body of Christ we are to be organised. We are to walk worthy of the calling of the Lord, and this calling includes unity of the Spirit. We all work together because we are one.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all who is above all, and through all and in all.⁵⁰

The body is a good illustration of the Church, there is more than one component, and yet the whole body works towards the same purpose – that is organisation. Each body is governed by its head. The Church is no different.

Headship

The Headship of Christ

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church.⁵¹ Jesus is over all, He is preeminent. Just as one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Him as Lord⁵², so we today bow the knee and confess Him as our Lord. All that we as the Church do is at the bidding of the Lord Jesus Christ. His commission to the disciples⁵³ was prefaced with the statement:

⁴⁷ John 18:36

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:11

⁴⁹ 1 Peter 2:5

⁵⁰ Ephesians 4:4-6

⁵¹ Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:23; Colossians 1:18

⁵² Philippians 2:10-11

⁵³ Matthew 28:18-20

All authority is given to Me, in heaven and on earth

The Church therefore is based on the delegated authority of Christ. We go because He sent us, we make disciples because He commands us, and we do it all with Christ's authority! We don't need to ask permission to make disciples or evangelise. The Lord of heaven and earth, our Head has said that we must. This is what gives Christians the confidence to boldly proclaim the Gospel!⁵⁴

We must examine all that we do as the Church on the basis of the Headship of Christ. We are here to serve Christ, not to serve ourselves, or even others. When we serve Christ we will meet the needs of others and will ourselves be satisfied in serving God as He intended.

Headship in the Church

The principle of the Headship of Christ is fundamental to the Church, but it must necessarily be delegated to those whom God has set over individual fellowships here on earth. Before considering the offices in the Church it will be helpful to look at the principle of headship evident in the Bible.

Back to the beginning

When God created the world, He set it in order. That order included the relationship of Adam to the rest of creation. Adam was to have dominion over the world⁵⁵ (not in the modern sense of domination), he was responsible for what God had made. Every beast was brought before Adam to be named – God delegated the responsibility to him!⁵⁶ The responsibility for right behaviour was also laid on Adam's shoulders⁵⁷ (before Eve was created). The same principle exists within the Church.⁵⁸ Christ is the Head, and He has delegated that responsibility.

This created order of things was broken when Adam sinned.⁵⁹ The desire of the man turned to domination instead of to have dominion. The desire of the woman turned to control of her husband. God's created order is what is to prevail in His Church. We are a new creation⁶⁰ and live in the world to come. Neither dominating, nor control are to be a part of how the Church is run.

God's gifts to the Church

The gifts to the Church outlined in Ephesians 4 are gifts of people. These are: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors & teachers. These have been

⁵⁴ Acts 5:27-29

⁵⁵ Genesis 1:28

⁵⁶ Genesis 2:19-20

⁵⁷ Genesis 2:16-17

⁵⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:3

⁵⁹ Genesis 3:16-19

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17

given for the equipping of the Church for the work of ministry.⁶¹ In his illustration of the Church as a building in chapter two of Ephesians, Paul states that it has been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ being the chief cornerstone.⁶² The work of the apostles who founded the Church and the prophets who completed the Scriptures is complete, leaving us with evangelists and pastor/teachers (the grammar of the sentence makes it clear that these last two go together).

The Pastor/Teacher

The Pastor/Teacher is vital for the local church. God gave this office for the purpose of building the body of Christ. The role of pastor is that of a shepherd and is one of the roles of eldership in the local fellowship (not all elders are pastors, but all pastors are elders). Middle Eastern shepherds do things differently to those in our own country. They lead the sheep. The sheep trust the shepherd and follow without being driven. The pastor of the flock must lead by example, not by domination. This is not a recipe for anarchy because the congregation are exhorted to "obey those who rule over you".⁶³

The way in which the pastor is to lead is by teaching – the pastor must know God's Word and be able to live it out and teach it to others. Ezra the scribe set himself to study God's Word, then to do it, and then to teach it. This is the task of the pastor. Timothy was instructed to commit what he had learned to faithful men who could in turn teach others.⁶⁴ This is the same idea found in Ephesians 4 – the pastor teaches in order to equip the fellowship that they in turn can minister to one another.

Eldership

Eldership is essential for every local fellowship. Paul's command to Titus was to set in order what was lacking and to appoint elders in every city.⁶⁵ The crucial need is for spiritual direction and leading, even before practical considerations. If the Church is spiritual, then a spiritual leader is the most essential person for every local fellowship. As a church grows it can fill other roles and appoint other offices, but the Church will not grow if it does not have a spiritual head to guide it.

The elder or elders are responsible for overseeing the work of Christ in this world. As such they must be carefully chosen, and special consideration must be given to their ability to rule.⁶⁶ The priority is for an elder even before the appointing of a pastor/teacher.

⁶¹ Ephesians 4:7-16

⁶² Ephesians 2:20

⁶³ Hebrews 13:7

⁶⁴ 2 Timothy 2:2

⁶⁵ Titus 1:5

⁶⁶ 1 Timothy 3:1-7, especially v. 4

Deacons

Deacons were first appointed when the Church grew to such a size that the elders could not do everything and needs were going unnoticed. Deacons fulfil a practical role in identifying and meeting needs within the local fellowship. Nevertheless, they must be spiritually qualified for that role.⁶⁷ The office of deacon is not the first step on the path to eldership. It is a distinct office requiring different gifts and abilities to that of the elder.⁶⁸

Putting it all together

There is, therefore a distinct order in place in God's Church, and yet there is much which is left up to the individual fellowship. The priority is that there is someone who is able to guide and direct under Christ's authority with the Word of God as the means to that end. As long as we accept the Lordship of Christ and the responsibility of elders within the Church to lead and the importance of the role of pastor/teacher to bring us to maturity we will not go far wrong.

Matters of style or tradition are not vital. The content of our Sunday worship services for example should be based on the need to be taught, to glorify God and to preach the Gospel – as long as this is done the way it is done should only be appropriate to our own culture and the preferences of the congregation. There is no right or wrong way to organise meetings, social activities, visitation, or any of the other things a church may do. As long as the Church is functioning as the body of Christ, with Christ as its Head the rest will look after itself.

⁶⁷ 1 Timothy 3:8-13

⁶⁸ In practice it is often the case that men better qualified as elders are first given a position as deacon.