

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

Christ is the King of his church. He is her Master, Lawgiver, Ruler, Sovereign, Lord. He is her *only* Master, Lawgiver, Ruler, Sovereign, Lord. I deliberately use capitals to stress the point. Christ is the Head of his church. He is the only Head of his church. No man is, no man ever was, no man ever can be, Head of the church – other than the God-Man Christ Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ. I do not think I could express myself more clearly. Christ is the Head of his church.

But Christ is in heaven. He is not physically present in every church. He is not physically present in *any* church. Not only that, as he has made plain, he exercises his rule, his governance, care and edification of his church – his local churches – through believers. Let me stress what I am saying. Christ exercises *his* rule over *his* churches through *his* people. I can illustrate my meaning in no better way than by drawing attention to the book of Acts. This is commonly misnamed ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ (as *per* the AV, NKJV, NASB). Well, it is, of course, but it would have been better styled: ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles’. Better still, would be to catch the spirit of Luke’s opening (Acts 1:1), and call his book: ‘The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ through His Apostles’; it would certainly be in keeping with Acts 2:33. Best of all: ‘The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, Working by His Spirit, through His Apostles and Other Believers, in the Early Days of the Church’. But a bit too much of a mouthful, I agree!

The point is, *Christ* rules, nourishes and edifies *his* churches through *his* people. In the first instance, he does it through *all* believers. Yes, all believers have a part in this! Secondly, and intimately connected with that – arising out of it – he does it through certain believers whom he raises up and equips by his Holy Spirit for this appointed task. And it is these two aspects of Christ’s care for his churches that I want to explore. Or rather, I want to explore the way in which we have, in this matter, departed from Christ’s revealed mind in Scripture.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

But first, the biblical pattern. *First*, the way Christ uses the priesthood of all believers to nourish and edify his churches. *Secondly*, the way Christ rules, nourishes and edifies his church through certain believers appointed and equipped by him. As I say, these two are intimately connected – *and in this order!* So much so, I think I may justly accommodate Christ’s words (Matt. 19:6): ‘What God has joined together, and the order in which he has done it, let man not separate’.

The priesthood of all believers

Writing to believers, Peter declared: ‘As you come to him, the living Stone... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation... the people of God’ (1 Pet. 2:4-10). See also Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. Hence, ‘the priesthood of all believers’. Having made a full statement of my position on this important issue in my *The Priesthood of All Believers*, I will content myself with a brief summary of the relevant points here.

From the outset, I want to stress that ‘the priesthood of all believers’ describes not only the believer’s individual experience, but stress the vital role it plays (or should play!) in the corporate life of believers, the church. The fact is, I am not talking about the priesthood of *the* believer. I am, of course, but rather I am talking about the corporate, the mutual priesthood of *all* believers.

Notice how Peter expresses it: Believers, he says, ‘like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Pet. 2:5). The ‘stones’ are, in the first instance, individuals; they are individual believers. The truth is, each believer is ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 6:19). But one of the glories of the new covenant is that these individual believers, these individual stones, these individual temples, are all fitted together by God, the great master-builder, to form a spiritual house, a spiritual temple (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 6:10 (AV, NKJV, NASB); Eph. 2:22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6). And believers, all believers, who form this temple, are, all of them, the priests who offer spiritual sacrifices to God

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

within that temple. Hence the corporate or collective nature of ‘the priesthood of all believers’. We are talking about believers as a ‘priesthood’ – not merely as individual priests. The emphasis in 1 Peter 2:9-10 is unmistakably corporate.

Moreover, while it is true that all believers, everywhere, constitute this one universal temple and priesthood, we can only experience the manifestation of this corporate spiritual priesthood within the local assemblies of God’s people – in each particular church, in every separate church. This is what Christ intended and set up. Every believer, therefore, has a privileged part to play in this local expression of the communal ‘priesthood of *all* believers’ – each believer being a living stone in the temple and, at the same, time, one of the priests sacrificing within that temple. What is more, each believer is at the same time part of the sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). And all of it is ‘living’ – ‘living’ stones, a ‘living’ sacrifice, in the temple of the ‘living’ God, the church of the ‘living’ God, in the city of the ‘living’ God, serving the ‘living’ and true God, all through a new and ‘living’ way, founded on Christ the ‘living’ stone (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:20; 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5). Living! We are not talking about a mechanical organisation, but an organism, a living body. And ‘the priesthood of all believers’ plays an integral part, a vital part, a ‘living’ part, in it all. This concept of church life is written large across the New Testament; namely, the total involvement of believers in the worship and service of God. Christ stipulates that *all* his people must be wholly involved in it all.

All believers – both men and women – are priests. All sacrifice – in a spiritual way, of course. Let me explain. All believers have a service to perform for God. There are no exceptions, no special cases. God has made all his people priests. Private judgement, prayer (including public prayer meetings), gospel service, mutual instruction, reproof and edification, practical care of the saints, daily holiness and dedication to God, financial support of the gospel and its ministers or servants, true spiritual humility... these are not just for the few to be concerned about, the fanatical super-saints. They comprise the duty which God demands of *all* his people; he has made them *all* priests, and expects *all* of them to offer the sacrifices that he has commanded. There is no opting out,

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

no holiday, no retirement. All God's people, all their days, carry the responsibilities and privileges of being priests; they all engage in priestly duty in serving God. Or should do.

And it is not just a duty. It is a privilege. In making the believer a member of his royal priesthood, Christ has bestowed a dignity second-to-none upon him/her, a dignity beyond description. Such dignity is the right and privilege of each and every believer.

But, of course, being a royal priest carries responsibilities. In particular, I stress that, although (as I will show) God raises up stated and recognised teachers in his church (and these must be men), all believers are, in the proper sense, teaching ministers. And this includes both men and women. Yes, it does! Women, under certain circumstances, as well as men, were teachers in the first churches (Tit. 2:3-5). Both Priscilla and Aquila (note the order) (Acts 18:24-28) helped the eloquent Apollos, by teaching him in their home. In the scriptures which follow, there is no suggestion that I can see that women are excluded.

All believers are gifted and appointed by Christ so that they may mutually¹ edify one another. This is their duty. This is their privilege. Another way of describing this is to call it 'an all-body ministry', 'a one-another ministry', 'an each-and-every-member ministry', as set out, say, in such passages as Romans 12:3-8; 15:14; 1 Corinthians 1:4-7; 12:4-31; 14:1-40; Galatians 6:1-2,10; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11,14-15; 1 Peter 2:2-5; 4:7-11; Jude 20-23. This is only a sample; the New Testament is replete with the concept. Consider *allēlōn*, 'of one another'. Joseph Henry Thayer spoke of 'reciprocally, mutually', saying it appears 'often' in the New Testament. Jeremy Thomson noted it occurs '23 times in the letters in sections of admonition'.²

All believers are teaching ministers. In saying that, I am not suggesting that all are able to address a congregation, but no child of God is without some ability to pass on a word of experience, a word of encouragement, instruction, comfort, reproof... to a fellow-believer. Let me emphasise this, even though I know it will sound

¹ 'Reciprocal' is probably more accurate than 'mutual', but it seems to me that 'mutual' is winning the day. See Rom. 1:12; 14:19; 1 Cor. 7:5.

² Thomson pp7-8.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

startling to some, perhaps many. But Scripture is rich on the subject:

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith... For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith [or, in agreement with the faith]. If it is serving [ministry, NKJV], let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully... I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another (Rom. 1:11-12; 12:3-8; 15:14).

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge... Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift... There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service [ministries, NKJV], but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... The same Spirit... gives... to each one, just as he determines... God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be (1 Cor. 1:4-7; 12:1-31, especially 4-7,11,18).

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God’s people, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit... But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... It was he who gave some... to prepare God’s people for works of service [for the equipping of the saints for the work of the

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

ministry, NKJV], so that the body of Christ may be built up... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work [by which every part does its share, NKJV]... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit [impart grace to, NKJV] those who listen... Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:7-16,29; 5:18-21).

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:15-17).

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing... warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else (1 Thess. 5:11,14-15).

Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living stone – rejected by men but chosen by God, and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... Pray. Above all, love each other deeply... Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace [minister it to one another, NKJV] in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking in the very words of God. If anyone serves [ministers, NKJV], he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 2:2-5; 4:7-11).

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh (Jude 20-23).

Is that not proof enough?

It is, I say, abundantly clear: All the saints are ministers, priests; all engage in ministry; all are responsible and gifted to be able to be a part of the mutual nourishing of the body of Christ. Note the emphasis, ‘to each one’. To each believer, Christ gives a gift or gifts so that each might serve the church. These passages tell us that *all* the saints are ministers, *all* are engaged in the ministry. In a few moments, I will be speaking about apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-and-teachers³ who are given by Christ to the churches, and who are used by him in order to equip the saints for this work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). But do not miss the vital point: Christ gives such teachers to his people *for the very purpose of fitting believers – all of them – to engage in profitable ministry*. Filling believers’ heads (or notebooks) with facts falls a long way short. The stated and authoritative (not authoritarian!) ministry is designed by Christ to produce believers who are able to edify each other, not to make them grow fat and, at the same time, increasingly dependent on the pulpit. Imagine, in a physical sense, always eating four square meals a day, and never doing any work, never doing anything productive with all the digested calories and proteins. The very suggestion is laughable. Or very sad! So it ought to be in a spiritual sense.

I repeat therefore: The stated ministry is designed by Christ to produce believers able to edify each other, not to produce a spoon-fed dependency. Note, once again, Romans 1:11-12; 15:14, just quoted. Paul the apostle wanted to visit Rome to be a blessing to the Romans, yes. *But they would also be a blessing to him*: ‘I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith... My brothers... you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another’. Why, even in the context of Romans 15:16, note the apostle’s emphasis on all-body ministry (Rom. 15:14-17; not forgetting Rom. 12:3-8).

Each believer is given grace for ‘mutual edification’ (Rom. 14:19), to be able to ‘edify another’ (NKJV), to be ‘competent to

³ I will justify my use of hyphens when the time comes.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

instruct one another' (Rom. 15:14), to be 'able... to admonish one another' (NKJV), to 'encourage each other' (1 Thess. 4:18), to 'comfort one another' (NKJV), to 'encourage one another and build each other up' (1 Thess. 5:11), to 'comfort each other, and edify one another' (NKJV), to 'warn... encourage... help' (1 Thess. 5:14), to 'warn... comfort... uphold' (NKJV) fellow-believers.⁴ Indeed, as we have seen, Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, could add, 'encourage one another and build each other up, *just as in fact you are doing*' (1 Thess. 5:11). Could Paul say this to many churches today? I especially note the 'just as in fact you are doing'. I am not talking about mere text-book theory; 'just as in fact you are doing'. Not 'just as you used to do'; not 'just as you once did'; not 'just as you would like to do'. But 'just as in fact you *are* doing'. This is the New Testament church that Christ set up!

Anticipating later developments, the New Testament gives no warrant whatsoever for the notion that 'the pastor'⁵ edifies the members; end of story. Not at all! It speaks of the elders edifying the believers who in turn edify one another – including the elders! How rarely does 'a pastor' think church members are there to edify him! And how few believers think they ought to edify their 'pastor'! Such ideas, I suggest, sound preposterous to most believers, not excluding 'pastors', today. But 'encourage [exhort, NKJV] one another daily' (Heb. 3:13) is said to all believers; all believers, not just a special man in the church – 'the pastor'.

1 Thessalonians 5:11-28 encapsulates what I want to say. Here we find an all-body ministry where all believers are expected to warn, to encourage, to show patience, to demonstrate love by action, to pray, to greet, and so on, and all need grace to carry out these functions. And at the same time, as an integral part of it, we have stated rulers.

That is how it should be. All believers need constant, consistent and continual teaching. And that teaching is designed (or ought to be designed) to prepare every believer to engage in 'the ministry'. This 'work of the ministry' is something *all* the saints are to do. It is not something reserved for elders or deacons; certainly it is not

⁴ See also Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 14:3-5,26; 2 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 4:25-29.

⁵ Note the almost universal switch from the biblical 'pastors-and-teachers' to 'the pastor'. I will have a great deal to say about this.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

confined to an ‘ordained’ minister. I am in the habit of reminding churches with, say, twenty members, that they have twenty ministers or preachers. Not in a formal sense, of course, but, nevertheless, a church with twenty members has twenty real ministers. It has twenty priests!

I do not wish to romanticise the New Testament churches. I acknowledge that they had their problems, and made their mistakes. Big problems, big mistakes. Nevertheless, it is a fact that I have been able to quote from the apostolic letters to the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Colosse, as well as Thessalonica – not to mention those believers to whom Peter and Jude wrote. What is more, some of the problems which arose in the New Testament churches did so because of their excesses in the believers’ exercise of their mutual ministry. Yet it is noteworthy that no apostle tried to put a stop to such ministry. Take, for instance, the excessive spiritual behaviour of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14). Paul did not reprove them for trying to engage in ministry. Nor did he tell them to be content to sit and listen. Certainly not! He just wanted better order, better edification in the exercise of their mutual ministry. He certainly did not want silence and inaction! By the way, reader, do you think the apostle would have to administer the same rebuke to most churches today? Why not? The fact is, problems can arise when there is little or no mutual ministry! Excessive signs of life are not altogether good, but they are a great deal better than depressing evidence of death! A corpse may have none of the problems of a living man. But do we want our assemblies to be gatherings of cadavers?

And the ministry of each and every believer reaches outside the church. A believer preaches when he or she engages someone in a spiritual conversation, or witnesses to an unbeliever. When the early church was persecuted, the believers were driven out of Jerusalem. ‘Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went... telling the message... telling them [not only Jews, but Greeks] the good news about the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 8:4; 11:19-20); that is, they talked to people, they told them about Christ, they ‘gossiped’ the gospel. The believers in question certainly did not stand in non-existent pulpits in non-existent places of worship at stated pre-arranged times! In noting this fact, I am

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

not, of course, condemning pre-arranged services – how did Acts 13:44 come about? Incidentally, neither am I saying that the usual form of a pulpit is necessary, nor even helpful. All I am doing is pointing out that the early church saw conversions, even when they were denied the structure (props?) we have come to regard as essential. In other words, we must not confine ‘preaching’ to a man standing in a pulpit. The word is far too rich for that!

What I am saying is this: according to the New Testament, every believer, each believer, is a priest, and, as a priest, each and every believer, in this sense, is a preacher. It is every believer’s responsibility and privilege – both men and women – to so live before men that, if they are moved to ask the believer about his hope, then that believer is fully able to meet the apostolic command, and is ‘always... prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have’ (1 Pet. 3:15). Actions do speak louder than words, and this is certainly more than an old saw (1 Pet. 3:1-6). Nevertheless, it must not be made into an excuse for silence. To tell others about Christ and his gospel is a part of the believer’s ministry. For biblical examples of it, see Mark 5:18-20; John 1:29-36,41-42,44-46; 4:28-30,39-42; Acts 4:20; 8:4-5,26-40; 9:20.

All this comprises the priestly duty of preaching the gospel, and yet none of it, perhaps, comes under what we know today as the formal task of preaching in a pulpit. To be engaged in any way in the spread of the gospel is to be engaged in a work of the greatest dignity and importance. It is a ‘priestly duty’. Preaching the gospel, both formally and informally, is, therefore, a most noble work. I would rather be a priestly preacher for Christ than be the king of Ruritania.

And when any are converted under such a ministry, God is pleased to receive such as an offering to him. He calls them ‘first-fruits’ (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; Jas. 1:18; Rev. 14:4, all NKJV). This, of course, is a reference to the old covenant, in that the ‘first-fruits’ were offered to God in worship (Ex. 23:16,19; 34:26; Lev. 2:12; 23:10,17,20; Num. 18:12; 28:26; Deut. 18:4; 26:2,10; see also Prov. 3:9; Jer. 2:3; *etc.*). Consequently, when, in the new covenant, the Holy Spirit uses the priestly ministry of believers, both in prayer and preaching, when he makes the call of the gospel

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

effective, when he saves sinners and sanctifies saints by it, God looks on this as a sacrificial, priestly duty and an offering pleasing to him. So much so, he regards all those who benefit from his people's labours as first-fruits to him.

So, whether within the church, or outside, all believers are priestly ministers, gifted by the Spirit for the work of 'the ministry'. Consider the apostle's words to the Corinthians:

Such confidence... is ours through Christ before God... Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:4-6).

Of whom was Paul speaking when he wrote: 'He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit'? I cannot accept that the use of 'ours', 'our' and 'us' speaks *only* of the apostles. If it does, then it would appear that Paul might have been implying that, while he and his fellows were competent, the Corinthians, and all believers since, were and are not. In the apostolic age, non-apostle believers, I suppose, just had to relax, sit back, not bothering their heads and bewildering themselves with things far beyond them, and let the apostles – who alone were 'competent' – do it all for them.

I cannot agree. How it would tally with Acts 17:11 baffles me. And what the equivalent is for believers after the apostolic age, including us today, I dread to contemplate – if it was only the apostles who were 'competent'. We would be bereft of a competent ministry today, and no believer would have any competence to edify another. This is so far out of step with the overwhelming impression the New Testament gives of believers exuberantly engaged in spiritual activity, edifying each other – or being encouraged to – that it cannot possibly be right. I have already mentioned 1 Corinthians 14.

Getting back to 2 Corinthians chapters 2 to 4, without question Paul *is* speaking of his own ministry, and that of his fellow-apostles and fellow-workers, yes. And, as I will explain, the specially endowed – the apostles – were, and their writings and works remain, absolutely essential and fundamental to the gospel, yes. Coming down the scale of authority, there is, there always has been, an essential role in the church of God for able teachers and

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

preachers – and these are not ten a penny. Only God can make them ‘competent’.

All that is perfectly true, as I will delineate. But notice how the apostle uses ‘we’ in these three chapters. Sometimes by ‘we’ he does mean, perhaps, just himself, maybe with other apostles and fellow-workers in mind (2 Cor. 2:17; 3:1; 4:7-15), although it is not absolutely certain in all these cases. But notice how he quickly moves into ‘you’ (2 Cor. 3:1-3). So what should we make of the ‘we’ and ‘ours’ in the next verses, leading on to the words I quoted above? And it is, I think, unlikely that the ‘we’ in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 4:16-18; let alone 5:1 and on, should be limited to Paul himself, or to Paul and his fellow-apostles.

In any case, it is undeniable that *all* Christ’s people are kings, priests and prophets by reason of their union with Christ. The prophets foretold it, and Christ established it. Not in a literal sense, of course, but in a spiritual sense. Believers, therefore, are ministers. I think we may justly argue that they are ‘competent’; all of them are ‘competent as ministers’. In fact, Paul himself says it is so. As I quoted earlier, writing to the Romans, the apostle declared: ‘I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another’ (Rom. 15:14). And when Paul spoke of ‘brothers’, he was not thinking only of men!

Each believer has God’s Spirit and can, therefore, in a measure teach others. The point can be broadened. God equips all his people to fulfil that particular ministry which he has for each of them. To deny it is to fly in the face of the provisions of the new covenant (Isa. 54:13; 61:6; Jer. 31:31-34; 33:14-22; Ezek. 40:46; 44:10-31; Zeph. 3:9-10; Mal. 3:1-4; John 6:45; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:15-18; 1 Pet. 2:4-12; 4:10-11; 1 John 2:20-21,27; 5:20; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Nevertheless, because, according to the New Testament, all believers are ‘preaching ministers’, it does not mean that it did not call for recognised and stated able preachers who were to edify the church by their teaching. The very suggestion shows a lack of understanding of what the New Testament means by the many different words it uses for ‘preach’ and ‘teach’. Obviously the promise that no member of the new covenant will need a human

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

teacher (Heb. 8:11; 1 John 2:20-21,27) cannot possibly mean what it appears to be saying at first glance. The writer to the Hebrews, and John were both teaching as they were saying it! Nobody in their right mind could doubt that the New Testament recognised the need for teachers and preachers, ministers!

But my point here is that *all* believers are competent ministers, gifted by God; *each* believer is gifted to minister. And that includes the ability to strengthen, encourage, reprove and confirm fellow-believers. Moses' wish (Num. 11:29) has been more than amply fulfilled.

I realise that I am touching a very sensitive point, saying something contrary to common practice in many churches. Perhaps it will disturb some. Some might go as far as to think – and accuse me of it – that I am subverting the preaching and teaching ministry. So let me try, yet again, to set any anxious heart at rest. *I am, myself, anxious – anxious **not** to give the impression that I am dismissing the need for stated, and recognised, gifted teachers.* I am not! In a few moments, I will prove it. Let me give one example now. A few pages back, I quoted Acts 8:4; 11:19-20, showing how 'ordinary' (I detest the word in this context) believers 'preached' the gospel. By God's grace, they were 'competent': 'The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord' (Acts 11:21). But go on to Acts 11:22-26. Barnabas recognised that these 'established' believers, along with the new converts, needed solid teaching. The 'ordinary' believers were 'ministers', yes, all of them, but none of them were gifted sufficiently to sustain an edifying ministry to the church – which the church was crying out for.⁶ Barnabas rose to the occasion. He brought Paul to Antioch, and the pair of them, both gifted teachers, 'for a whole year... met with the church and taught great numbers of people'. And they were successful, for it wasn't long before the Antioch church had three more capable 'prophets and teachers' listed alongside Barnabas and Paul (Saul), who was listed last! (Acts 13:1; see also Acts 15:35).

I think that all this speaks for itself, and should calm the fears of any who think I might not hold to a stated, gifted ministry. I

⁶ The church always is. It is today! I certainly hope churches are praying for, and on the lookout for, able teachers.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

certainly hope so. I could not be more emphatic on the need for an able, stated preaching and teaching ministry, and on the biblical warrant for it.

My point here, however, must not be lost. All believers have a ‘ministering’ gift and ability. All of them. And this is an aspect of their priestly ministry under the new covenant. *This* ministry needs emphasising – and exercising!

Take Christ’s assurance: ‘Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’ (Matt. 18:20). How wrong it is to confine this glorious, sweeping promise to a token quote at the opening of a public meeting. Let us stop tugging our forelock at the text and moving on! Christ meant what he said. Wherever two or three believers – believers, not just ministers or elders or whatever – wherever and whenever two or three believers come together for any spiritual purpose – to pray, to talk, to sing, to read and study Scripture, to testify, to repeat experience, or whatever – the Lord is with them. What does this tell us about Christ himself – the one who can guarantee his presence wherever and whenever his people meet? Think of that! Think of the dignity Christ places upon such informal gatherings. Then again, think of the confidence Christ has in his people. Think, too, of what gifts and abilities the Spirit must dispense to them. The context of Matthew 18 is clear, and the rest of the New Testament is replete with the working out of the principle. Take the young church of the Thessalonians. Take the apostle’s second letter to them. Trace the outworking of the principle throughout that letter. Though it was a young church, all of them had a part in all of the church’s spiritual life. Even the apostle felt the need of their prayers for him. It shows just what Christ meant when he promised: ‘Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’. This is the priesthood of all believers in action.

Action! That’s the word! Let us rescue ‘the priesthood of all believers’ from our Statement of Faith, and put it to work! It must not be reduced to a slogan. Everything that now follows in my book arises directly out of this universal priesthood of all believers. Those who rule the church are, themselves, in the first instance, believers, and, as such, priests of Christ. Their fellow-priests, as part of their priestly function, recognise and acknowledge the gift

Christ gives to these men, and submit to them – to be edified in order to further exercise their own ministry. But all the members, the rulers and the ruled, are priests of the Lord; all of them *equally* priests of the Lord. Nothing that follows – *nothing* – can take away from *that*. Nothing should be allowed to take away from it. Christ died for it!

Christ's rule of the church through men appointed and equipped by him

Christ ruled, ordered, governed, taught and disciplined the first church, the church in Jerusalem, through his apostles (Acts 2:42). This, however, could only be an extraordinary measure and of temporary duration, and for two reasons. *First*, as the gospel spread, the number of the churches became too great for individual apostolic supervision on a day-to-day basis.⁷ *Secondly*, the apostolic age was bound to come to an end, in any case. While their work is permanent, the apostles themselves were only temporary, and for five reasons:

1. They were foundational (Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 2 Pet. 3:2; Jude 17), and a foundation is laid once only – or ought to be! – in the beginning. That foundation, once laid, remains. The New Testament is a record of apostolic writings and practice and, as such, it remains foundational throughout this age.
2. They were men who had seen the Lord Jesus. They were eye-witnesses (Luke 24:46-48; John 15:27; Acts 1:21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20; 5:32; 10:39-41; 22:14-15; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:7-8; 2 Pet. 1:16-18; 1 John 1:1-3).
3. They were appointed directly by Christ (Matt. 16:18-20; Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:1-2,8,15-26; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:3; Gal. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; Heb. 2:3-4).⁸

⁷ However, the permanent system began to be introduced long before the number of the churches reached this point.

⁸ Acts 1 is unique, and raises some interesting but (to me, at least) unanswerable questions. Even so, the choice of Matthias was left to

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

4. They were gifted in an extraordinary way. This included direct revelation of all the truth to them (John 16:12-15; Acts 1:1-2; 15:28; 19:11; 1 Cor. 2:13; 15:3; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 1:11-12; Eph. 3:2-5; 1 Thess. 4:8; Heb. 2:3-4; 2 Pet. 3:2; 1 John 5:9-12; Jude 17).⁹

5. They uniquely had authority, subject to Christ, over all the churches (1 Cor. 5:3; 2 Cor. 10:8; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 2:10-13; 2 Thess. 3:12-15; 3 John 5-10).¹⁰

For these five reasons, the apostles had no successors; the apostolic era was extraordinary and temporary. As a result, as that age came to an end, it was essential to have in place a permanent, ordinary¹¹ system of church care and government. Furthermore, it was vital that this system should be clearly and simply set out in the New Testament, so that all churches, in all ages, might know how to nurture themselves in accordance with the mind of Christ. If not, how could newly formed churches obey Christ and maintain themselves? In particular, how could we today? Christ met this need. Contrary to what many say, the New Testament *is* clear on church care and government, and we are left in no doubt as to how a church is to be instructed, fed and disciplined, now that the apostolic age has closed.¹²

Christ's direct intervention, and both he and Barsabbas met the qualifications listed in Acts 1:21-22.

⁹ Some of these verses – John 16:12-15; 1 Cor. 2:13, for instance – may refer to a wider constituency than the apostles.

¹⁰ Note how the apostolic note is stressed in the opening verses of almost all the New Testament letters. See also 2 Cor. 10 – 12. But even then, they exercised that authority as a father or mother (1 Cor. 4:14-15; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7,11), not as despots. Moreover, ultimate authority resided in the church (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5, especially verses 4,7,13; 6:1-6); that is, in the universal priesthood of believers. More precisely, authority resided in Christ working through the universal priesthood. The apostles did not lord it over fellow-believers, and in turn, they commanded elders not to (1 Pet. 5:3).

¹¹ I do not use 'ordinary' in a demeaning way. I mean ordinary in contrast to the extraordinary foundational period of the apostles, which was temporary. There is nothing 'ordinary' about God's church.

¹² I do not offer a thorough explanation of it here. Excellent volumes are widely available. Above all, the New Testament is plain enough.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

It is no surprise, of course, to find changes introduced in the way the churches were governed and taught in the New Testament during the years which followed Pentecost, as the extraordinary system gave way to the permanent. For instance, in Acts 6 we read of the appointment of assistants for the apostles in the Jerusalem church, men generally reckoned to be deacons, though this is not stated.¹³ Indeed, some might consider these assistants to be themselves unique – a kind of body of proto-elders, a sort of half-way house between an apostle and an elder, a sevenfold ‘one-off’. Then, in Acts 11:30 or 14:23, we have the first mention of elders. By the time we reach Acts 14:23, it seems, such men were being appointed in every church as it was formed. In Acts 15, we have the record of a church meeting at Jerusalem in company with the apostles.¹⁴ Yet even as the ordinary system was being put in place, extraordinary officers were still active: Timothy and Titus, for instance. As for these two, Scripture does not give us their qualifications, or tell us how to recognise or appoint their equivalent today. Hence, whatever office they held, it could not have been a permanent institution. Leaving aside this special point, it was in the New Testament letters – especially those to Timothy and Titus – that the final and permanent system for the governance and instruction of the local church was clearly and finally established.

This permanent system had to meet two main criteria: *First*, it had to guarantee the apostolic connection – since every church must be under apostolic authority (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 14:37; Phil. 4:9; 1 Tim. 3:14-15; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2; 3:10-17; 2 Pet. 3:2,15-16; 1 John 1:3; Rev. 22:18-19). The apostles were taught ‘all things’, guided into ‘all truth’ by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (John 14:26; 16:13). To depart from, or to add to, the apostles’ teaching and practice, therefore, is serious beyond words. I would say ‘fatal’. The permanent system had to take full account of this essential submission to apostolic authority in Scripture. *Secondly*, the

¹³ Acts 6:1-6. The authority for the common view – that the seven were deacons – cannot be found in the New Testament, but in Irenaeus. See Chadwick p48.

¹⁴ A church meeting, not, as is commonly thought, a Council, reading Christendom back into the New Testament. See my *Battle*.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

permanent system had to cater for a teaching and ruling ministry in a local sense; otherwise churches would be bereft of resident leadership, and chaos would ensue.¹⁵

What are the main features of the permanent system of church rule?

No church is free to chart its own course. Rather, as above, every church is under apostolic authority; that is, every church is to be ruled and taught by Christ in Scripture. This spiritual oversight is to be carried out by men duly qualified according to that revelation (1 Tim. 3:1-15), appointed by the church alone, free from outside interference. These local rulers (note the plural – never forget the plural) are variously called elders, bishops or overseers; they are also called pastors-and-teachers (Eph. 4:11).¹⁶ There is no distinction in the terms, however; they are used interchangeably (Acts 14:23; 15:6,22-23; 20:17,28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; 5:17; Tit. 1:5-7; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). True, the various terms do convey the *nuances* of the qualifications and work of such men – their maturity, experience and wisdom, their ability to rule the flock of God, to care for, protect, guard and feed it – but the names themselves are interchangeable. They do not speak of different men or offices in the church. *All* the elders, bishops, overseers, or pastors-and-teachers teach, rule and care for the church over which they are appointed (Acts 20:28-31,35; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Thess. 5:12-15; 1 Tim. 3:2,5; 5:17; Tit. 1:9; Heb. 13:7,17,24; 1 Pet 5:1-4),¹⁷ though *some* have a greater responsibility for teaching, and are to be supported financially in that work (1 Cor. 9:11; 2 Cor. 11:7-10; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:10-19; 1 Thess. 2:6-9; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). No title is to be used, however, to distinguish any elder, who is so supported,

¹⁵ In addition, until the canon of Scripture was complete, churches needed prophets. This point, however, is outside my scope in this book.

¹⁶ If not, to whom was Paul referring in Eph. 4:11? I will come back to the verse.

¹⁷ Heb. 13:7,17,24 – ‘your leaders’, or ‘those who rule over you’ (NKJV) – is intriguing. Some would say that this refers to apostles, and does not refer to ordinary rulers and leaders in the churches. But if it does speak of ordinary leaders and rulers – elders – notice how the writer to the Hebrews addressed the people and spoke to them about their leaders – not as would nearly always be the case today, writing to ‘the pastor’ about *his* people.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

from the others, nor is there to be any suggestion of a hierarchy within the eldership. The continuance of church care is assured as one generation of elders, bishops, overseers or pastors-and-teachers fulfils its responsibility to instruct and prepare the next (2 Tim. 2:2). In all this, every church is independent, answerable to Christ alone for its affairs. This much is clear from the New Testament. This is the permanent system of the rule and care of every church.

An ability to teach is an indispensable mark of an elder (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:5-9). Christ gives pastors-and-teachers to his church (Eph. 4:11-12), men whose gift and work is distinguished from that capacity which all the members have to edify one another. Moreover, 'those whose work is preaching and teaching' are to be supported financially by the rest of the church (1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). The New Testament knows nothing of an 'every-man-ministry' which would abolish this particular gift which Christ gives to his people for their edification (Eph. 4:11; 1 Thess. 5:12-13). What I said when thinking about the priesthood of all believers must not be interpreted as advocating a free-for-all. Certainly not!

Without in any way making the unjustifiable leap from 'apostle' to 'pastor', consider Paul's apostleship. He was 'put into the ministry' by Christ himself (1 Tim. 1:12, NKJV). He had been 'entrusted with a stewardship' (1 Cor. 9:17, NKJV), 'entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel' (Gal. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11). This 'commitment' or 'entrusting' took place only when God 'approved' him (1 Thess. 2:4), 'considered [him] faithful' (1 Tim. 1:12). Having received this ministry, Paul felt a compulsion to discharge it (1 Cor. 9:16-17), and did so with a sense of having to account for his service (1 Cor. 4:1-5).

How ludicrous to think all men in the New Testament churches were apostles! How ludicrous, likewise, for all male believers today to think they are pastors-and-teachers. Not all male believers are competent to minister in the sense of maintaining a public, stated teaching ministry. Far from it. Christ gives pastors-and-teachers to the churches. Believers need such pastors-and-teachers. They are essential. But they do not grow on trees. If we debase biblical teaching and preaching, we produce mediocrity in the preaching and teaching ministry, with consequent heavy damage to the

church. The believers will not be fed, and, as a result, they will not be equipped for their own ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). Those, therefore, who are taught must recognise and appreciate their pastors-and-teachers. And those who are gifted by Christ to be recognised pastors-and-teachers in his churches need Paul's attitude – the sense of privilege at being put into the ministry, being entrusted with the gospel, taking pains over discharging their responsibility, and so on.¹⁸

But none of this means that we dare get anywhere near idolising the teacher, or elevating him with a title he ought not to be given, to a status he ought not to have. If we do, we will produce a dependency culture, and we shall run to spiritual flab. For, just as the priesthood of all believers does not do away with recognised pastors-and-teachers in a church, neither does the existence of pastors-and-teachers do away with the priesthood of all believers. All the saints are ministers. The existence of pastors-and-teachers (Eph. 4:11-12) does not abolish the principle, which is found in the same passage in Ephesians 4:7, that 'to *each one* of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it'. And, in the context, this grace – it must be stressed – is not grace *to be saved*. It is grace *to serve* – Christ gives grace 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Eph. 4:12), or 'for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ' (NKJV). 'From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work' (Eph. 4:16).

Summary

Emerging from and within the priesthood of all believers, Christ raises up and enables stated pastors-and-teachers over his church, and this with a double aim – first, the individual believer's edification and then, secondly, his being made useful, edifying to others. This is precisely Paul's point in Ephesians 4:11-12. Christ

¹⁸ See, in addition to the above-cited passages, Rom. 10:15; Col. 4:17; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-2,5; Heb. 13:17; Jas. 3:1. These passages, however, have been mistakenly applied to all professional ministers without pointing out that some referred to the apostles, some to Timothy, and some to all believers as ministers in general.

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

gives pastors-and-teachers to his churches *in order to enable the whole body to minister to itself*, to train the church to be self-edifying, not to spoon-feed the church *in order to make it dependent on the pulpit – and the pulpit alone – for its food*. ‘Each part does its work’, ‘every part does its share’ (NKJV), in the teaching ministry, so that ‘the *whole* body, joined and held together by *every* supporting ligament, grows and builds *itself* up in love, as *each* part does its work’ (Eph. 4:16).

Not least, one aspect of a teaching and preaching ministry is to train every believer to be able to read the Bible with profit for himself or herself. Harking back to a previous illustration, it’s a case of giving the congregation a fish or a fishing rod. That there is a place for both, I do not deny – but by far the more important is the rod. Believers need to learn principles, not mere facts. How-to is better than what-to. There is a place, I say, for both, but... Recipe-preaching, penny-in-slot preaching: ‘Do this, and you will get the desired result’ – is not real preaching at all.

All believers are meant to ‘consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds... Let us encourage one another’ (Heb. 10:24-25), ‘consider one another in order to stir up love and good works... exhorting one another’ (NKJV); all believers are meant to do this, not just the pastor. Paul tells all believers, not just ‘pastors’ or ‘worship-leaders’: ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God’ (Col. 3:16). Notice how, in this passage (as in Ephesians 4), the stated teaching ministry prepares the saints for this mutual ministry. I refer to Colossians 1:5-10; 2:1-7 which leads to Colossians 3:16. Let me quote from these passages:

You have... heard... the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world, this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow-servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ... Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you, and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding... bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God... I want you to know how much I am struggling for

The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule

you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God; namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened [established, NKJV] in the faith as you were taught...

And what does this lead to, and culminate in? But this:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

There it is. I am not for a moment pretending that the New Testament churches were sinless, but I do contend that they were characterised by vibrant spiritual life. So much so, Satan could not let so fair a scene remain unmolested. As long as the apostles were alive, although he won some battles, he was always losing the war. With the death of the apostles, however, he began more and more to get the upper hand, using his power and influence to play havoc with Christ's church. To this grievous history, and its consequences – with us still, and going strong, I am afraid – I now turn.