

The Christian Church: Its Purpose, Importance, Structure, Authority, and Functions

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Introduction

From the earliest times Christians have been organized into churches. Then as they grew in number, organizational development included a structure beyond the local church level as well. Thus, it is possible to speak of the universal Church (the Church as a whole) in addition to the local church. In other words, the Church is both plural (local churches, Acts 9:31; 15:41; 16:5; 19:37; et. al.) and singular (the entire group of churches, Matthew 16:18; I Corinthians 12:28; 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32, et. al).

The Greek word for *church* essentially means *a calling out*. The fact that the word was used to describe an organized group of Christians tells us that its extended usage meaning refers to the fact that Christians believe they have been *called out* of the world and *into* an organized Christian organization. In other words, believers were not called out of the world into a kind of “no man’s land” to stand on their own as individual believers. The fact that they were organized into a collective group means that the Church must have a purpose for its existence.

Purpose and Importance of the Church

In the New Testament the Church has been compared to a variety of other things, which helps us to understand the purpose for the Church’s existence. There are seven metaphors, six being stated directly and one being implied:

- The Body of Christ—Romans 12:4-5; I Corinthians 12:27-28; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:12-16; 5:30; Colossians 1:18, 24; and 2:19
- A Temple or House of God—I Corinthians 3:9; 3:16-17; II Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; and I Timothy 3:15
- A Family—Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; I Peter 2:4-5; and 4:16-17
- A Kingdom or Nation—I Peter 2:9; the Greek textual evidence for Revelation 1:6, and verse 9

- The Bride of Christ--II Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:22-33
- A Field—I Corinthians 3:9
- An Army—implied in Ephesians 6:11-17, where if individual believers put on spiritual armor, then the Church must be like an army

The primary purpose of the Church is to proclaim the gospel to the whole world and make disciples of Jesus (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20; Mark 14:9; 16:15; Luke 9:6; 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). This is in fact the mission statement of the Church. The Church was established by Jesus Himself when He was on the earth, specifically when He declared that He would “build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Naturally, all members are to witness for Jesus among those they associate with (Acts 1:8), but the Church as an organized body is to proclaim the gospel in a way that most individual members could not. In the course of fulfilling this mission, the Church would naturally be expected to directly finance missionaries and evangelists, direct mass communications means of proclaiming the gospel, publish written literature to reach people, and operate an educational system where permitted by law. Furthermore, in order to meet the needs of people and thus help open their hearts to hear the gospel, the Church may also desire to establish medical work and institutions and to actively assist in global natural disaster relief efforts and to otherwise help the destitute and the downtrodden.

These indirect means of proclaiming the gospel must never substitute for the proclamation of the gospel, for the Church is not primarily a social or charitable organization but a spiritual body. For this reason, the Church and its leaders should avoid engaging in politics except where political entities might interfere with religious freedom. This avoidance of political matters would include the avoidance of endorsing political candidates or political parties and of lobbying on behalf of political issues outside the arena of religious freedom.

The seven metaphors of the Church outlined above also help to clarify the purpose of the Church as well as the relationships among its members. For example, especially at the local level, the Church as a family requires it to nurture its members and help them grow spiritually in Jesus. This nurturing should not include interference in the members’ own family units, but instead consist of voluntary counseling, praying for one another, and providing a collective spiritual environment where the individual members can grow. Part of this spiritual environment is the conduct of public worship and the teaching of the Scriptures, including for the members’ children and young people. All of this is based on the reality that those who are left on their own do not usually grow in balanced and appropriate ways. Likewise, this is true of spiritual growth. This is an important principle to note especially by Christians who think that they can live a healthy Christian life without the need to be part of a church family. Or to use another metaphor, when individual coals

of fire are separated from the group of burning coals, their fire tends to go out quickly and become cold.

If the Church is like an army, we should ask ourselves how effective can an individual soldier be apart from the organized army. This military metaphor reflects the Biblical teaching that Christians are engaged in continual spiritual warfare against the devil and his demons as represented by the expressions *principalities, powers, the rulers of darkness, and the spiritual hosts of wickedness* (Ephesians 6:12). Being part of any warfare includes training and discipline, both of which require guidance from experienced military officers and hard work. The New Testament does not teach that being a Christian is easy or carefree. This military metaphor also implicitly means that cooperation and coordination with other members of the army is vitally important. Thus, Christians are not on their own to struggle with the forces of darkness. They need to be part of the army of God if they wish to be victorious.

The metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ speaks to several other necessities. First, just as every part of a human body is important, even down to the smallest toe, every member of the Church should be valued as an important part of the Church. No one should be left out if they wish to serve in some capacity. Of course, that does not mean that every member is capable of serving in every facet of church leadership, for the New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit gives each member different spiritual gifts (I Corinthians 12:4-31; Ephesians 4:7-16) precisely to edify the church and to promote “the unity of the faith and of a knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine...but speaking the truth in love...and growing up in all things into Him” (Ephesians 4:12-15).

A member can identify his or her spiritual gift or gifts in more than one way. First, if certain functions come naturally and easily, it is probably because the member actually has that gift or particular gifts. Second, one might take a written spiritual gifts test to help you identify them. Finally, as you work in the church, others will also be able to tell which gifts you have and do not have. No one works alone in the church, so the local church body should play a key role in identifying one’s gifts and in assigning each member a particular responsibility (subject to the member’s willingness to serve, of course).

Second, the metaphor of the body of Christ also implies cooperation among each of the individual parts of that body. If there is no cooperation, or coordination, among a person’s body parts, then he or she cannot accomplish much. For example, when a person seeks to walk, the person’s legs need to work together or else he or she will fall to the ground. Again, this metaphor points to the fact that no individual member is a law unto himself, allowed to do as he pleases in the church.

Third, this metaphor reminds us that we must all care for the spiritual health of the church. If a person ignores part of his or her body, such as a limb, finger, or toe, the whole person hurts. Therefore, church members have a responsibility to promote the spiritual health of the other members. Again, of course, the Church is not a dictatorial organization, for it is founded on the principle of love. Therefore, promoting everyone's spiritual health should be seen in this context and consist of using humility and caution in how to approach other members. Besides, since Christ is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 4:15; 5:23), ultimate authority rests in Him and not with the Church's human leaders, who are equally sinners in need of God's grace as everyone else. Promoting the health of the church also involves collectively providing worship and learning activities that all may participate in.

As for the Church being God's temple or house, this reminds us that the Holy Spirit resides in it (I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:22), just as the temple or tabernacle in Moses' day was built for God to dwell in (Exodus 25:8). Therefore, the Church should be defended and not destroyed (I Corinthians 3:17). It also reminds us that God's temple has nothing in common with idols, lawlessness, darkness, or with an unbeliever (II Corinthians 6:14-16). As such, it is also "the pillar and ground [foundation] of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15). Therefore, members of the Church should jealously guard the reputation of the Church and maintain it as the repository of divine truth, being careful to not allow errors of faith and practice to come into it.

Note that references to the Church as God's Kingdom in both I Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6 also refer to its people constituting a priesthood or being priests. The purpose for this is stated as being that the Church should "proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9). The apostle Peter's statement calling the Church "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" is adapted from Exodus 19:5-6, where it was originally applied to the nation of Israel at its covenant ceremony with God. Israel's mission was to be a light to the Gentiles, a living example of righteousness lived out in the lives of its citizens (Isaiah 62:1-2). Likewise, the Church was to be a spiritual nation or kingdom that exemplifies righteous principles to the world. Also, a priest offered sacrifices and taught the people the laws of God (Leviticus 10:8-11). Likewise, church members should offer spiritual sacrifices to God (I Peter 2:5; cf. Romans 12:1) and teach God's laws.

In God's Church as a kingdom and as the body of Christ, all its citizens or members are equal with each other. There is no room in the Church for racial, ethnic, gender, or class prejudices or discrimination of any kind. In fact, the Church should be the one truly classless society on earth, for such will be the literal kingdom of glory in heaven and the new earth.

The Church as the bride married to Christ needs to maintain the holy relationship with Him just as a wife (and husband too) should remain faithful to her husband (II Corinthians 11:2). The Church also needs to remember that she should be subject to Christ as her husband (Ephesians 5:23-24).

In other words, this metaphor speaks against spiritual fornication or adultery as playing the spiritual harlot when anything or anyone else becomes more important than Christ in a believer's life. Jesus must be the center of our thoughts and affections in order to be faithful to our marriage covenant relationship with Him.

The Church as God's field suggests that He cultivates it in order that it may produce a harvest of crops (I Corinthians 3:7-9). The process of cultivating an agricultural field includes tilling, planting, fertilizing, and watering. Sometimes this process may offend us, but the ultimate result will be rewarding for all.

Structure of the Early Church

According to the New Testament, all leadership in the Christian Church other than the apostles of Jesus was located in each local church. There was no organization beyond the local church level.

Church Offices and Other Leaders

Although several different names are employed, there were only two kinds of leaders in each local church, excluding apostles, evangelists, and prophets, who were not church officers in the strictest sense.

First, five different names are used to describe the same office: (1) Elders; (2) Bishops; (3) Presbyters (the word used is *eldership* or *presbytery* in I Timothy 4:14); (4) Overseers; and (5) Pastors. The word for *elder* appears the most often (Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; I Timothy 5:17, 19-22; Titus 1:5, James 5:14; and I Peter 5:5) and designates one who is older, although that may be older in experience but not necessarily in age. The word for *presbyter* or the *presbytery* occurs in I Timothy 4:14 and I Peter 5:1 (where it is used as the equivalent of *elders* in v. 5) and again has the meaning of an older person (or elder). The word *bishop* comes from a Greek word for episcopate and means a superintendent or overseer (I Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7; I Peter 2:25; and Philippians 1:1). The word translated as *overseers* in Acts 20:28 is the same word elsewhere translated as *bishops* and is used interchangeably with the word for *elders* in the same context (v. 17). Then in Ephesians 4:11 the word *pastors* is used, which is a word that means *shepherd*. Compare with Hebrews 13:20; I Peter 2:5; and 5:4 for Christ as the Shepherd of the Church. Note also that in Ephesians 4:11, there is no word for *some* immediately preceding the words for *pastors and teachers* as there is before the words for *apostles, prophets, and evangelists*. Thus, we should view this latter office to be that of pastor-teachers rather than as two separate offices. The above data clearly shows that all five terms—elders, bishops, presbyters, overseers, and pastors—are used interchangeably with each other and thus refer to one office in the local Church. To combine all of their respective meanings, it is the leader with greater experience as a Christian who oversees and shepherds his Christian flock (or church).

Since this office concerned the spiritual needs of a local church congregation, we can safely infer that they occupied themselves in preaching, teaching, and officiating in baptisms, Holy Communion services, baby dedications, and in other general meetings of the church family.

The question has arisen as to whether bishops or elders can be married or if a life of celibacy is required of them. On the basis of I Timothy 3:2, which includes the fact that a bishop must be *the husband of one wife*, some have insisted that bishops or elders *must* be married. However, the emphasis there is on the fact that he must have only *one* wife rather than on that he must be married. Also, in his statement following this one, the apostle mentions that deacons should be married to *one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well* (v. 12). Does that mean that a deacon must have children as well? No one argues for that position because it defies common sense. Of course, it is the Biblical teaching on marriage for all people that one man should be married to only one woman (Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 19:3-6; Mark 10:2-9).

Others have seen in Paul's counsel that a bishop must be married to *one wife* as meaning that he should not have been previously divorced or be a widower. However, that would be an odd command, given that even Jesus allowed divorce in cases of fornication (adultery); He also forbid marriage to anyone who had been wrongly divorced (Matthew 19:9). Given that the practice of concubines (women who lived with a man who were not married to him—thus an unofficial “marriage”) was common among the ancient Greeks and Romans, Paul seems to emphasize that bishops (and deacons) should set a high moral standard by not having any concubines. In any case, sexual fidelity seems to be his point.

Certainly, the fact that Paul mentions bishops and deacons as usually being married means that the Church should not require celibacy of its spiritual leaders. After all, the apostle Peter was a married man (Matthew 8:14; Mark 1:30; Luke 4:38). Although Paul himself was unmarried, he taught that any decision to remain in that condition was strictly a voluntary one (I Corinthians 7:1-9). Jesus also taught that celibacy was a voluntary decision (Matthew 19:10-12). The post-apostolic Church early on encouraged celibacy for ordained men (bishops, priests, and deacons) and increasingly began to mandate that for certain situations. This was based on the idea that being married was a distraction from the duties of the clergy, who were increasingly seen as “married” to Christ. Finally, Pope Gregory VII decreed the celibacy of the clergy in 1074, and the Second Lateran Council (1139) ratified it in the Western Church. The fact that the Church gradually pushed celibacy on its clergy is also confirmation that it was not part of New Testament teaching. Therefore, we conclude that bishops or elders may choose either marriage or celibacy, neither condition should be enforced by policy.

The other office in the local churches was that of the deacons (Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:8-13). Although they were not immediately called deacons, it appears that the seven men chosen in the Jerusalem Church to care for the needs of the widows in the church there were the first deacons in

Church history (Acts 6:1-6). Since deacons were involved primarily with the physical needs of the members, we can safely infer that in the later Christian times when congregations had their own church buildings, they may have also supervised any needed repairs to keep the building operational and also to take care of the grounds outside the building. It would also be highly appropriate for deacons to assist in the serving of the communion bread and wine and in the financial duties as well.

Ephesians 4:11 also adds that Christ gave the Church apostles, prophets, and evangelists. We must distinguish between the apostles of Jesus and the apostles of the Church. Jesus ordained His twelve closest disciples as apostles (Matthew 10:1-15; Mark 6:7-13, 30; Luke 9:1-6; 9:10; cf. Luke 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10) because He *sent them out in His name*. Paul was later included among these special apostles of Jesus (Romans 1:1; I Corinthians 15:1, 8-9; II Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1, 11-12; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; I Timothy 1:1; II Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1). The word *apostle* means *one who is sent out*. The context in which Jesus sent out His disciples to preach His message and heal the sick means that He gave them His authority to speak and act for Him much as a nation's ambassador officially speaks for that nation. The early Church believed this too, for in Acts 1:21-26 the apostle Peter urged the Church to appoint an *apostle* to replace Judas Iscariot, and such a person must be someone who (1) had spent personal time with Jesus, (2) had been called personally by Jesus, and (3) was a witness of His resurrection. The selection of Matthias on that occasion was also considered selected by Jesus personally because the apostle prayed that their casting of lots between the two candidates would be guided by the Lord in selecting the one of *His* choice.

Acts 14:14 (cf. 13:43; 14:4) refers to both Paul and Barnabas as *apostles*, although there is no evidence that Barnabas met Jesus or was called by Him to be an apostle. In Acts 13:1-3, Barnabas was ordained and *sent (apostled)* by the Church as missionaries (Saul, or Paul, was the other one there, so we can view Paul as *both* an apostle of Jesus *and* of the Church). I Corinthians 12:28-29, in addition to the passage in Ephesians 4, includes *apostles* in the list of officers in the Church as the result of a specific spiritual gift (4:7). Because these apostles are obviously different from the special apostles of Jesus, we should identify them as missionaries officially sent out by the Church. In this way, they did not actually hold a church office in the local church.

Evangelists are those who spend their fulltime lives in preaching the gospel to those outside the Church. Like modern missionaries, they spend their fulltime ministry preaching the gospel, although they usually do so to the peoples of their own country. Therefore, like the church apostles, they do not actually hold a church office in the local church.

Finally, Ephesians 4:11 mentions prophets as being given via a spiritual gift to the Church. Prophets have the prophetic gift and therefore speak authoritatively for Jesus. But like the Old

Testament prophets, they did not usually hold an official office but exhorted the people and their leaders to follow the Lord and His law.

Titles and Gender Issue in the Church

The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Episcopalian churches, among a few others, use the title of *Father* to apply to their pastors, priests, bishops, and other leaders. However, Jesus Himself said that we should call no one our spiritual *father* because we have only one spiritual Father, and that is God Himself (Matthew 23:9). Those aforementioned churches, along with several of the mainline Protestant churches use the title of Reverend for their pastors and other leaders. But Psalms 111:9 calls the Lord's *name reverend* (meaning of the Hebrew word, although it is not always translated as *reverend*). With a title like that used of the Lord, it would be audacious and thus inappropriate for any human leader in the Church to be called *reverend*. Biblical terms like pastor, elder, bishop, and others are, of course, the appropriate titles to use in order to show respect while avoiding a hierarchical or worshipful meaning.

Then there is the modern issue of the role of women in the Church. Traditionally, it has been argued that only men served in leadership roles in ancient Israel and in the New Testament Church and that this practice is a model for the Church in all places and all times. First, that is not historically quite accurate. While Israel and the early Church were male-dominated, ancient Israel did have some women who had leadership roles. The most notable of these was Deborah, who was both a prophetess and a judge in Israel (Judges 4:4). As a judge, she heard difficult legal cases and rendered judgments that were binding on all parties, which especially included men (who were mostly the ones who brought cases to the court). Beyond that, in the period of the judges in Israel's history, judges were generally regarded as political rulers because there was no king in Israel yet. Furthermore, Deborah led the Israelite army into battle against the Canaanite King Jabin (4:2). If God had ordained for some theological reason that women should never be leaders in Israel, then He would not have chosen Deborah to be a judge in Israel. In this case, the exception invalidates the rule as interpreted by more conservative Christian believers.

In the New Testament Church, it is true that the only official leaders were men. The apostle Paul is often quoted to justify this on theological grounds. In I Corinthians 14:34-35, he admonishes women not to speak in the church at Corinth, for it is *shameful* (v. 35); "they are to be submissive, as the law also says" (v. 34). And in I Timothy 2:11-15, Paul says that women should "learn in silence with all submission," for Adam was created first, and Eve was deceived rather than Adam.

First, it should be pointed out that in these chapters, as is generally true in the New Testament, Paul used the word for *woman* or *women*, and the words for *man* and *men*, that were swing nouns. That means they can either refer to married women (wives) and married men (husbands), or to single women and men, depending upon the context. In I Corinthians 14:35 makes it clear that he

is speaking of the husband-wife relationship when he says that they (women) should ask their own men at home; obviously, the word for *men* is appropriately translated as *husbands*. Furthermore, his reference to *the law* in verse 34 can only be to Genesis 3:16's statement that Eve's husband would *rule* over her. I Timothy 2:11-15 is paralleled by a passage in I Peter 3:1-6 because both passages discuss the wearing of jewelry and other ornamental dress. The context in I Peter definitely speaks of married women in relationship to their husbands, so we should also understand Paul's statement in I Timothy 2 as referring to the husband-wife relationship.

This is an application of the headship principle in which the husband is declared to be the head of his wife (I Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; I Peter 3:1), which was the result of sin (Genesis 3:16). Before sin the husband-wife relationship was entirely equal. Therefore, when Paul says in I Timothy 2:12-13 that wives should not have authority over men because she was created after the first man, he is not attempting to interpret Genesis 1-3 but simply adding that as an additional after-the-fact reason.

Now that we have established that Paul was speaking about the headship principle between the husband and his wife, we need to ask ourselves if this headship principle means that all men are the head of all women generally or not. This is exactly what the opponents of women having leadership roles in the Church maintain. The only chapter in Scripture that explicitly compares the headship principle in the Church and in the husband-wife relationship is Ephesians 5. There Paul states that wives should submit to their husbands "just as the church is subject to Christ" (v. 24). In verse 23 he had said that "Christ is the head of the church", not men. When he refers to the duties of husbands, notice that they are to follow the model of Christ: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (v. 25). Plainly, Christ's headship over the church is the model for the husband's headship over his wife—not that the husband's headship over his wife is the model for all men's alleged headship in the church. Therefore, the fact that the husband is the head of his wife does not mean that all men are the head of all women in the Church.

Factual knowledge about the culture of the Middle East and Europe in the first century helps enlighten us as to why Paul admonished wives to be silent, and thus not exercise authority, in the churches. That secular culture also taught that the husband was the head of his wife. And one way they applied that principle was that wives should not take a visible leadership or decision-making role in public. Therefore, the apostle applied the same Christian principle of headship in the same way in the churches for the sake of the gospel. However, in Galatians 3:28, Paul stated the Christian ideal when he wrote that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." As a Pharisee, Paul would have formerly prayed that he was thankful that he had not been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. So here he is explicitly refuting that Pharisaical view. Note also that he does not say merely that they are *in Christ* but that they are all *one in Christ*. In other words, men and women (here he does *not* use the swing nouns) are one with each other when they are in Christ.

Given all these facts, two conclusions can be reached. First, whenever and wherever the culture does not permit women to take visible leadership roles, the Church should refrain from that practice as well, for it is more important to proclaim the gospel than it is to insist on *who* exactly can proclaim it. Second, whenever and wherever the culture permits women to take visible leadership roles, the Church ought to be the model in setting the example for women to play some of those roles on an equal basis with men. Therefore, there actually are no theological or other permanent reasons to exclude women from becoming pastors, elders, or other leaders in the Church.

Changes in the Development of the Church Structure

In the original New Testament Church there were several elders or bishops in each local Church. This is shown in passages like Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, Titus 1:5, and James 5:14 and is confirmed by Church history. However, by either the late first century or the early second century, there was one bishop in each local church who functioned as its pastor and several elders or presbyters and deacons. In the early second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (110-117) in Syria, gave the first clear idea of what became known as the three-fold ministry in the Church: (1) the bishop as the head of a district or region of local churches (as in a city), called by the collective name of the episcopate; (2) the presbyters or elders (still plural in his day), although they are not referred to as priests in his writings, and called by the collective name of the presbytery; and (3) deacons (again plural). The skeleton of the idea of the priestly function of bishops and presbyters had apparently originated in the early second century, but it was Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (248-258) in North Africa, who more clearly defined that concept in the middle of the third century. The growing emphasis that came with these developments was the idea that believers should obey their bishop and look to him for guidance on matters of faith and practice. This development occurred as a response not only to the growing needs of the Church for more effective organization but also to the growing threat of heretical groups within the Church.

We view these developments negatively for two reasons. First, it led to the establishment of a hierarchy that is foreign to the New Testament. The bishop had the highest authority, followed by the presbyters or elders and then the deacons. In the original Church, as explained earlier, there were multiple bishops or elders in each local church, and there was no hint of one office being an authority over another but instead were viewed as equivalent names for the same office. Second, we reject the priestly function of the clergy as unbiblical for reasons explained in the next paragraph.

First, no members within the Church were identified by the word for *priest* in the New Testament. Only Jesus was called a priest, as He was several times in the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 4:14; 5:5, 9; 7:23-28; 8:1-2; 9:11, 24; 10:19-22). Second, *all* members of the Church, including leaders and others, are called priests as belonging to a kingdom of priests in the sense of representing Jesus to the world and of offering spiritual sacrifices of reasonable service to God (I Peter 2:5, 9; Romans

12:1; Revelation 1:6, 9). This concept is called the “priesthood of all believers,” an expression originating among the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century.

Finally, the concept of hierarchy within the Church is also foreign to the New Testament. The rise of the three-fold ministry within the Church led to a general distinction being made between the clergy and the laity, which means between the clergy and the remainder of the church members. But I Peter 2:9 identifies the *people* of the Church by the Greek word from which the English word *laity* is derived. And the entire Church is called the laity with no distinction between the clergy and the other members. This supports Peter’s concept of *the priesthood of all believers*.

The priestly function of the clergy eventually led to other doctrines, such as the confessional, the practice of confessing one’s sins to a priest, and the idea that the bread and wine in the Holy Communion service mystically became the real body and blood of Jesus (called transubstantiation). We will address our opposition to the confessional (also called the sacrament of penance) here but transubstantiation under the section entitled “Functions of the Church”).

First, we reject the sacrament of penance because we have rejected its foundation of the priestly function of the clergy. Surely, if the clergy are not priests, then they cannot forgive people’s sins. Second, we differ with those Christian scholars (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox) on their interpretation of John 20:23, the only Bible text used to support this doctrine. That text reads, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Supporters of the confessional understand this verse to authorize the special apostles the right to forgive sins, and then by extension of the apostolic succession teaching (see below), all bishops and their priests also have that right.

We differ with this interpretation for at least two reasons. First, claiming the prerogatives of God is the sin of blasphemy. This is understood by two incidents in Jesus’ life recorded in the gospels. In Matthew 9:2-7, Mark 2:1-12, and Luke 5:17-26, Jesus healed a paralytic man and forgave him his sins. Certain scribes and Pharisees in the room complained that Jesus committed blasphemy by claiming to forgive the man’s sins because God alone has the authority to do that. Jesus did not deny their definition of blasphemy, but replied that as the Son of Man He had the authority to forgive sins. If Jesus agreed that claiming divine prerogatives like forgiving someone else’s sins was blasphemy, He would not have later given His apostles the authority to forgive sins. [Note: Of course, claiming to be God would also be blasphemy, as illustrated in John 10:33, 36 and in Matthew 26:63-65 and Mark 14:61-64.]

Second, the apostles and elders in the New Testament Church did not understand Jesus’ words in John 20:23 as giving them the authority to forgive people’s sins. In Acts 8:22 Peter told a man to repent of his sin, and perhaps *God* would forgive him. Neither is there any example where an apostle or elder forgave a person’s sins. Therefore, when Jesus spoke those words in John 20:23,

He was stating that in their preaching of the gospel, they had the ability to tell someone who accepted the gospel that his sins were forgiven and to tell someone who rejected it that his sins were not forgiven. Therefore, the sacrament of penance is a false teaching.

Reasons for the Expansion of the Church Structure

As we stated near the beginning of this paper, while all members are to witness for Jesus among those they associate with (Acts 1:8), the Church as an organized body is to proclaim the gospel in a way that most individual members could not. In the course of fulfilling this mission, the Church would naturally be expected to directly finance missionaries and evangelists, direct mass communications means of proclaiming the gospel, publish written literature to reach people, and operate an educational system where permitted by law. Furthermore, in order to meet the needs of people and thus help open their hearts to hear the gospel, the Church may also desire to establish medical work and institutions and to actively assist in global natural disaster relief efforts and to otherwise help the destitute and the downtrodden. All of these things would require Church organizational structure beyond the level of the local church. Therefore, we have no problem at all with such expansion so long as it conforms to Biblical principles. In fact, we believe such expansion is necessary and even vital.

In order to coordinate the work of the local churches and to implement some of the more expensive ventures discussed in the previous paragraph, the first level of Church governance above the level of the local church should be that of a district or conference of local churches in a specific geographical area. And at some point, because the Church's mission is a global one (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20; Mark 13:10; 16:15; Acts 1:8), the highest level of Church governance should be at the worldwide level in a headquarters.

Authority of the Church

Apostolic Succession

Two doctrines emerged in early Church history that solidified the three-fold ministry with its hierarchal nature, apostolic succession everywhere in the Church and the Petrine doctrine in the Western Church. The concept of apostolic succession was that when the special apostles of Jesus ordained bishops in the Church, this bequeathed apostolic authority to them, which of course was the teaching authority of Jesus. Then the ordination of each subsequent generation of bishops received apostolic authority too. In this way, Church Tradition through the apostles was the guarantee that the Church would never teach heresy. This became the eventual reason for members to obey their bishops and to view them as the arbiters of proper faith and practice. The Petrine doctrine built on apostolic succession by declaring that Jesus had made the apostle Peter the human head of the Church on earth. As tradition said he was the co-founder and first bishop of the Church

at Rome, each subsequent bishops of Rome have been seen as successors to Peter and thus the head of the Church on earth. This gives the Roman bishop, also called the pope, authority over all other bishops. We discussed this issue in our paper entitled “The Case for Christianity” and explained the reasons we rejected these two doctrines. So we will not repeat that evidence here.

Biblical Principles of Church Authority

We have already established the fact that the Church is subject to the Holy Scriptures, so that its authority must stem from the Bible’s authority and teachings and not on any notion of apostolic succession. Ultimately, of course, Jesus is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18) and its chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-22; I Peter 2:4-8). But Jesus speaks chiefly through the Word of God. We have also established the fact that there should be no hierarchy per se in the Christian Church and no distinction between the clergy and the laity. Therefore, the fact that the officers in the Church are needed to provide oversight and guidance does not mean they are to lord it over the Church, but should provide those things with humility.

But how should Church officers at any level of Church governance be selected? We start with the fact that elders or bishops were *appointed* to their offices in the New Testament Church by the special apostles and their close associates (Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:23; cf. v. 20; Timothy in I Timothy 5:17, 22; Titus in Titus 1:5). Of course, the apostles and their close associates have long ago passed from the scene. So the question remains as to how elders or bishops should be selected, although there is no doubt that they should be ordained by the laying on of hands by existing elders or bishops (I Timothy 4:14; 5:22)

For deacons the answer is straightforward because Acts 6:1-6 says that the entire Jerusalem Church chose the first deacons, who were then ordained by the apostles. This means they must have been elected by the congregation. And in the absence of special apostles and their close associates, elders or bishops ought to ordain deacons after the local church has elected them.

Beyond the local church, the only example of Church authority that exists in the New Testament is provided by the record in Acts 15 of the first Church Council, which occurred in Jerusalem. A dispute had arisen about whether or not Gentile converts should be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 5). The Church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas and *certain others of them* to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to decide this question (v. 2). This implies that these delegates were either implicitly or explicitly voted as delegates by the church at Antioch (14:26-28). After hearing the testimony of Peter and then Paul and Barnabas, and the comments of James, the Jerusalem Council made a decision. The only recorded ones who spoke at this council were Peter (vv. 7-11), Paul and Barnabas (v. 12), and James (vv.13-21), the brother of Jesus (Acts 12:17; cf. v. 2, where James the brother of John had already been killed). However, in the context of such a major dispute others undoubtedly also spoke.

The fact that the apostles and elders are distinctly mentioned in addition to others present (15:6, 12, 22-23) indicates that they were recognized as the leaders at the Jerusalem Council. That is reflected in the record of who spoke there. However, the decision of the Council was the product of all who were there, which included the whole Jerusalem Church (vv. 22-23). To reach a conclusion would have required that either an official or unofficial vote had to have been taken. The council's decision was considered binding on the whole Christian Church, for it was called a *decree* they should keep (Acts 16:4). Evidently, the Jerusalem Church was regarded as the leadership church because most of the apostles were still members there. Therefore, from the Jerusalem Council, we derive the fact that while in our day elders or bishops should lead out in the affairs of Church governance, the final decision belongs to all of the Church by a democratic process. This means that the underlying principle of Church governance is the democratic principle of majority vote.

How should the democratic principle work in the modern church, especially with different levels of Church governance? First, we believe that the entire local church should vote on its own local officers. In order to avoid encouraging individuals to openly campaign for certain offices (an unseemly practice for church offices that require humility), it would be prudent to use an indirect democratic system of electing a nominating committee to nominate one member for each office. Then the entire church membership should vote to ratify or not the nominating committee's recommendations. The only exception to this practice should be the selection of the church pastor, the chief elder or bishop, who is necessary to coordinate the efforts and activities of the church. If the pastor is elected by the congregation, the temptation might eventually be too great to preach to "itching ears" (II Timothy 4:3), that is, to avoid preaching the straight truth because many members do not wish to hear it. Therefore, we propose that the better alternative is to have the district or conference level of Church governance in the same district appoint the local pastor in each church. In order to avoid the pastor from becoming a dictator, the local church ought to elect a governing board or committee to provide advice and guidance to the pastor. The local church might wish to simply declare that committee to be the group of elders or bishops in the church, or it might wish to elect other members to such a committee. Even if the latter case is decided, all local elders or bishops should be members of that committee because their function is to provide spiritual leadership and guidance.

For the sake of practicality, levels beyond the local church will require the use of indirect democracy via the election by the local churches in a district or conference of representatives to a conference council. Again, in order to prevent anyone from openly campaigning for a conference-level office, the use of a nominating committee would be advisable. The council would elect that nominating committee, who would nominate one person for each conference office, while the rest of the council is hearing and voting on reports of church business. Then when the nominating committee presents the slate of nominees, the entire council should vote to ratify it or not. In this process, it might be more practical to segment different votes on different parts of the church

offices rather than having to vote once for or against the entire document when some may object only to one or two names. At the conference level itself, a leader is necessary to coordinate and lead its activities, whether that person be called a president, an archbishop, or some other title. But to avoid a dictatorship, the conference council ought to elect a governing board or committee to provide advice and guidance to the leader. Such a board or committee should meet at regular times as determined by the conference council. Finally, a conference council should meet on a regular basis according to a previously approved schedule and according to the details of how the delegates should be apportioned.

The same outline of Church governance for the local and conference levels of Church governance should, of course, apply to any additional levels of governance, including the global Church level, which makes the worldwide conference meeting the most authoritative body in the entire global Church.

Tithes and Offerings

The finances of the Church at all levels should be based on both tithes and voluntary offerings. The principle of returning a tithe (meaning *one-tenth*) originated in the Old Testament (Leviticus 27:30, 32; Numbers 18:21-24; Malachi 3:10) and even predates the existence of the Israelite nation's existence and the giving of the law by Moses (Genesis 14:20, where Abraham returned tithe to the priest Melchizedek). Tithe was returned to God by giving it to the Levites, who worked fulltime in the temple and therefore did not receive an inheritance of the land given to the other eleven tribes when they entered into Canaan. (Numbers 18:21-24). Even the Levites were required to return a tithe of the tithes they received from the people (Numbers 18:25-28). When the more permanent structure was built to replace the tabernacle-tent, storage space was provided in an adjacent building to store the crops that the tithes were paid in (II Chronicles 31:10-11; Nehemiah 10:38; 13:10-14; Malachi 3:10). The tithe was returned on the basis of a person's increase or profit (Deuteronomy 26:12). According to Deuteronomy 8:18 it is God who gives us "power to get wealth." Moreover, He is the actual owner of the world and everything in it (Psalms 50:10-12) and the source of "every good gift and every perfect gift" (James 1:17). Returning a tithe of our increase reminds us of that fact and is a positive way to express one's stewardship.

The New Testament does not explicitly teach that Christians should return a tithe, but Jesus did endorse tithing (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). In I Corinthians 9:13-14, the apostle Paul implicitly endorsed tithing as necessary to support those who preach the gospel fulltime: "the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel." He said this just after reminding Christians that those who serve in the temple "eat of the things of the temple" (v. 13), which of course consisted of the food as the currency in which tithes were returned. Thus, Paul endorsed the returning of tithe for the Christian Church. These passages, in addition to the facts that tithing predated Israel's existence and that the principle of stewardship concerning all the

wealth that God still gives His people, mean that tithing should be practiced by Christians in the Church.

Since we live in a money-based economy rather than an agricultural economy, and tithe is to be returned on the increase (or profit), then believers should return one-tenth (a tithe) of their gross income (even those moneys taken out of our paychecks that eventually come back to us in various direct or indirect ways). For those in business for themselves, ordinary business expenses may be deducted in order to determine the profit and then the tithe returned on that profit. The *storehouse* that the tithes should be returned to is the Christian Church. And since it should be reserved for fulltime gospel workers, all of the tithes collected by the local church should be given to the conference level of Church governance to pay for the pastors and other fulltime Church workers. Of course, a certain percentage of what the conference level receives should also be given to the next level of Church governance, and likewise in turn all the way to the worldwide headquarters.

In addition to the tithe, other expenses outside of the salaries to fulltime gospel workers will require voluntary offerings by the members. After all, Malachi 3:10 teaches that those who fail to return tithe *or* pay other offerings are robbing God. Thus each member has the responsibility to pay his or her fair share, based on his or her income of course, to the church in offerings in addition to returning their tithe. Obviously, some of the offerings should remain in the local church to meet its needs. But some of it will have to go up to the various levels of Church governance to enable them to meet their needs.

Functions of the Church

In addition to the institutions operated by the Church at different levels of Church governance and the work of missionaries and evangelists, there are at least nine different functions of the local church. They are listed below:

- Public Worship
- Religious Instruction
- Baptisms
- Baby Dedications
- Holy Communion
- Anointing of the Sick
- Church Discipline
- Church Socials
- Community Outreach

We will address each of these functions in the order listed above.

Public Worship

The first thing we should note is that public worship among God's people occurred at least once per week on the Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3). It was called "a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation." The Hebrew word for *convocation* means *called out* to an *assembly* or *meeting*. Since it is called a *holy convocation*, the meeting on that day was dedicated to God. Certain Levites (I Chronicles 6; 9:14-16) were organized as musicians for formal, public worship (I Chronicles 25:1-5); see also I Chronicles 9:33. It is also significant that the largest book in the entire Bible is the book of Psalms, which is a hymn book. This data is confirmed by the testimony of numerous Jewish historians that public worship in Israel included much music. Therefore, public worship is important to God.

In the New Testament Jesus also made it His habit to attend public worship services every week (Luke 4:16), even when the people wanted to kill Him (Luke 4:28-30). Therefore, public worship must have been very important to Jesus. In I Corinthians 14 Paul addresses the need for orderliness in the Church assemblies (vv. 19, 23, 26, 28, 33-35, 40), which means the early Church was engaging in public worship, a fact we also know from early Christian writers.

Worship Defined

In Scripture several words are associated with the word for *worship*, including Hebrew and Greek words meaning *reverence*, *awe*, and *fear*. Combining them together gives us the following definition of Biblical worship: Worship is the giving of extravagant honor, respect, and devotion to God with a sense of awe (humility) that one is in the presence of Almighty God. This definition helps us to identify several principles of public worship. But first we turn our attention to why believers should worship.

Reasons to Worship God

First, please note that God does not actually *need* our worship. By definition, God is self-sufficient and has need of nothing from anyone. If He needed something, it means He would be lacking in something, which in turn would mean that He is not God. He *desires* worship from His intelligent creatures, but He does not actually *need* it. Therefore, worship is directed to Him, but it is not for His benefit.

Second, even though God desires our worship, He does not desire it for the selfish reason of seeking to boost His ego, for God is the personification of love itself (I John 4:8, 16). *If* He wanted our worship for His *own* sake, when He does not need it, then He would be the greatest egomaniac in the universe. Obviously, He is not that. Therefore, we must conclude that while our worship should be directed to God, it must be for our own benefit. That is the reason, then, that God desires

our worship, because He knows it will benefit *us*. Public worship brings at least four different blessings to the worshipers of God:

- It reminds us that God is the Source of all that we have, of every blessing, including our very lives (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalms 50:10-12; Acts 17:28; Philippians 4:19; James 1:17).
- It brings us joy, faith, and peace because worshipers are in the very presence of God, who is the Source of joy, faith, and peace.
- It keeps the spiritual fires burning inside us for God. Like a burning coal that is plucked out of a group of burning coals and quickly dies out, the Christian will burn out if he consistently avoids public worship and other fellowship experiences with like believers. It is an illustration of the principle that “no man is an island.”
- It ennobles our character to become more like God’s character, for the Scriptures tell us that by beholding we are changed (II Corinthians 3:18).

General Principles of True Worship

We can now identify five major general principles of public worship:

First, true worship is directed toward God; it is God-centered, not believer-centered. In other words, worship is about God, not about us. This means that we must avoid anything that is entertaining in nature. Unfortunately, the modern era has seen much that is entertainment in nature creep into Christian churches’ worship services. These entertainment features include making the platform into a veritable stage where performances take place. Music that sounds like secular music has been introduced with Christian words, supposing that this makes it Christian music. Applause for “performances” is now frequent in many churches during their worship services. Increasingly, worshipers raise their hands with their fingertips pointing upward, which is designed to create a tingling feeling in the fingers—a feature common at rock music concerts. All of these features represent a believer-centered worship in which the believer seeks to feel good. [Note: Psalms 47:1 is sometimes used to justify hand-clapping in a worship service. In fact, it is the only text that mentions this activity in a worship context. In light of the similarities with Psalms 46-48, this verse is probably an extension of 46:10, so that it is a call to *all* peoples on earth. And *all* people would not be in the sanctuary. Besides, as a Psalm, it is sung by God’s people. Therefore, it is not literal hand-clapping in a public worship setting.]

Second, true worship involves the heart of the worshipers, accompanied by obedience and mercy, not merely a habitual going through the motions. When the heart is not involved in the worship,

God hates our worship (Genesis 4:1-8 with Hebrews 11:4; I Samuel 15:22; Psalms 40:6-8 (cf. Hebrews 10:5-9); Psalms 51:15-19; Isaiah 1:11-17; Jeremiah 6:19-20; 7:22-24; Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; John 4:23-24).

Third, because true worship occurs in the very presence of God, there should be an atmosphere of reverence or awe. Again, this is not congruent with an atmosphere of entertainment or of mere routine.

Fourth, true worship is also engaged in with great joy, not with a somber tone (Psalms 16:11; 51:11-12; 95:2; 107:22; Jeremiah 33:11).

Finally, true worship will avoid the use of pagan practices in Christian worship (Deuteronomy 12:2-4, 29-31) and maintain a clear distinction between that which is holy and that which is profane (Ezekiel 22:26; 44:23). This also would apply to bringing in secular music and putting Christian words with it, as well as avoiding the use of any images or objects in the worship of God. The latter is called idolatry even when it is using these things in the worship of the true God (Exodus 20:4-6; 32; I Kings 12:26-33). God is a spirit (John 4:24), so any images are inappropriate to use in the representation of God *or* the kissing and bowing to objects associated with God (such as a Bible or a cross).

Elements of Praise and Preaching

Because public worship is the giving of extravagant honor, respect, and devotion to God, then naturally it will involve much praise. The Old Testament frequently employs this praise/thanksgiving theme, including in public worship settings. Most notable are the passages which also use the word for sacrifice or offering, because such things were common in worship at the temple.

First, there is the “sacrifice of thanksgiving” that refers to a peace offering made at the tabernacle (Leviticus 7:12). Second, the psalmist tells people to *offer* (as in *offering*) “thanksgiving” and pay one’s vows (Psalms 50:13-14), and verses 8-9 place this in a sacrificial/worship setting at the earthly sanctuary, as does the paying of one’s vows (Leviticus 7:16; Psalms 22:25; 116:14, 18-19). This would be the equivalent of returning one’s tithes and giving of one’s offerings to the Lord.

Second, Psalms 95:2 calls on God’s people to “come before His presence with thanksgiving...with psalms.” This refers to singing as an act of praise or worship.

Third, the offering of the “sacrifice of praise” to God is “the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Jeremiah 33:11; Hebrews 13:15). While that could include singing, it could also refer to the giving of public testimonies in a religious gathering.

Fourth, prayer is compared to “the evening sacrifice” in Psalms 141:2. Prayers are helpful and hopeful in a variety of ways to the believer, but remember that public worship is directed as praise to God or the exhortation of His Word. Therefore, prayers in a public worship format should be about praise and thanksgiving. If there are certain needs in a congregation or for specific members to be healed of a sickness, let the one who prays publically in this setting word his or her prayer in the form of thanking God for taking into consideration the needs of that person rather than in the form of a plea to God for help. It may not be wrong per se to plead to God to heal someone in a public worship service, but putting it in the form of a thanksgiving in advance is more suited to the purpose of a public worship service. Other meetings can make specific pleadings to God for various needs in the Church.

Finally, there is the element of preaching. Old Testament prophets preached, but this was generally apart from regular public sanctuary worship. The first regular preaching in Judaism appears to have originated with the earliest synagogues in the fourth or third century B.C.

Preaching appeared to be a vital part of public Christian worship from the very beginning. It is important for at least two reasons. First, no part of worship is true worship if the believers do not know God and recognize His majesty of character that lead them to celebrate His presence and to obey Him. Thus spiritual education is a part of preaching. Second, preaching is also an exhortation to believers to encourage them to keep the faith, obey the Lord’s instructions, and remain in a close relationship with Him. Sinful beings need persistent reminders and encouragement to do these things continually, especially the nearer we come to the Second Coming of Christ. That is why Christians are strongly urged to “not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25; cf. vv. 23-24). Finally, Romans 10:14-17 specifically declares that preaching the Word of God brings faith. For all of these reasons, preaching is a vital part of the public Christian worship service. This is the reason that churches that minimize preaching in favor of rituals or dramatic “productions” should be suspect.

We have thus identified the major elements that should be included in public worship. They are, in no order of importance, (1) the returning of tithes and giving of offerings; (2) singing (and music in general); (3) praying; and (4) preaching. In addition, selecting certain members to give their brief testimonies of what the Lord has done for them recently may also be included. We might also add that the brief reading of Scripture apart from the preaching of the Word is also appropriate.

The Element of Music

The element of music deserves more attention because of music’s powerful influence on people and because of the introduction in recent times of secular-sounding music into public worship. In order to appeal to young people, many churches now offer two different weekly worship services,

one traditional and one contemporary. But if something is worldly, as in entertaining, then it is wrong to place that in a public worship service, even if a church also provides a more traditional service for other members.

We should first note that music is a powerful tool to change people's moods and to impact their mental and physical health as well. Ancient scholars recognized this, including Plato, Aristotle, and Confucius, who wrote about the significance of music to ennoble or degrade human behavior. Hollywood also knows that music can powerfully and quickly change a person's mood. That is the reason they have experts in the film industry who select different kinds of music as background to different film scenes. For example, you will never see a Hollywood film that plays band music in the background to a love scene, for they know it is incongruent with the scene. Since we use different types of music to evoke different responses in people, how can anyone say that any kind of music is acceptable in the worship of Almighty God? It just makes no sense if you stop and think about it.

Music is extremely powerful because it first enters the thalamus and then into the brain. In doing so, it bypasses the frontal lobes, which is the moral decision-making part of the brain. Therefore, the selection of the right kind of music is of vital importance for the true worship of God.

There are three elements within music. There is the melody, which the part of the brain that listens to it is concerned with the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual. There is harmony, which the part of the brain that listens to it is the intellectual part because harmony creates a more complex structure than melody alone. Finally, there is the rhythm (or beat). Rhythm is important because it binds a piece of music together. Human beings respond to this on a physical and emotional level when the rhythm or beat is strong and dominant. All pagan worship emphasizes rhythm or beat. But Christian music should emphasize the spiritual and the intellectual and should therefore emphasize the melody and harmony more than the beat.

Heavy repetitious beats eventually will place people in at least a partial trance-like state in which the five senses are numb. Syncopation occurs when a beat is on the off-beat. Syncopation is not bad in itself, but constant repetitious syncopation heightens the effect of heavy repetitious beats. It also actually creates friction, or confusion, between the left and right sides of the brain. Specifically, it tends to loosen the hips so that they begin to sway in a sensual way, and it raises blood pressure and increases the heart rate.

All of this means that music is not merely a matter of personal taste, although that is partly the case. But these facts of music mean that some types of music actually constitute bad music because it tends to be physically harmful and/or spiritually harmful to the person.

Musical Instruments Used in Public Worship

Some churches teach that because the New Testament does not reflect the use of musical instruments in public worship that all instruments should be excluded from such worship. However, how does the movement from the Old Testament to the New Testament require that musical instruments used in the former cannot be used in the latter? Have the instruments somehow become evil? We conclude that if musical instruments were acceptable to God in the Old Testament, then they are still acceptable to Him in the New Testament. Moreover, the New Testament does show a public worship scene with musical instruments in it. In Revelation 4-5 the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and numerous angels repeatedly sing. It is said that the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders each have a harp (5:8; cf. Revelation 14:2; 15:2). If a stringed instrument like a harp is acceptable in the very sanctuary in heaven, then at least stringed instruments ought to be acceptable in Christian worship on earth. After all, it is not the instruments that are evil but how people play them that can be evil.

Concluding Remarks on Music

Here is a summary of the kind of music that should be used in public worship:

- It is joyous, not somber or frivolous.
- It evokes an attitude of reverence or awe.
- It is not easily identifiable with secular music.
- It reflects the scientific standards of good music, which means that the melody is clearly heard, there is harmony, not dissonance (when two sounds clash), the rhythm or beat is subordinate to the melody and harmony, and there is no monotonous repetition of sound patterns (no mantras), which have the potential to put people into a trance-like state of mind.
- Its lyrics should reflect accurate Biblical truth, be God-centered rather than believer-centered, and avoid any monotonous repetition of phrases (no mantras), which have the potential to put people into a trance-like state of mind.

Religious Instruction

Some religious instruction will occur through the preaching, of course. But we deduce a need for a more direct form of instruction and learning in order for individual believers to develop a more in-depth knowledge of the Scriptures. This would naturally appear to require the holding of

various classes just before or after the worship service. While the adults are in those classes, it would be prudent if the children and young people were in classes designed for their various age groups as well. These classes will afford people to ask questions and to otherwise be part of a discussion in an environment similar to a regular classroom experience, except, of course, there is no need to add the stress of exams and specific graded assignments.

Christian Baptism

Christian churches have practiced some form of baptism from the very beginning of Christian history. We know this both from the New Testament and from Christian writers outside the New Testament. However, different modes of baptism were eventually practiced and different interpretations of its purpose, necessity, and who could be baptized also arose. We discuss those issues and more in this section, particularly in the context of the New Testament.

Purpose of Baptism

The New Testament teaches that there are four purposes for baptism, or to put it another way, Christian baptism symbolizes four different things. First, it symbolizes a person's death and burial to his or her past sinful way of life and resurrection to a new way of life (Romans 6:3-6). In other words, it is the symbol of the new birth experience (John 3:5-6) and the washing away of one's sins (Acts 22:16). Second, baptism is a baptism *into Christ* (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). Since He is the spiritual husband to His Church (Ephesians 5:23-27; II Corinthians 11:2), and baptism is a formal, public ceremony, then baptism is kind of a wedding ceremony in which the believer "marries" Christ. It is thus the official beginning of his or her relationship with Jesus.

Third, baptism is the means by which a person becomes a member of the Church. This is deduced from the fact that baptism is *into one [the] body* of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13; cf. vv. 27-28). This is confirmed in Acts 2:41-47, where those baptized are said to have been *added* (vv. 41, 47). Although the Greek text does not contain the phrase *to the church* in verse 47, that is the intent of Luke's words because he describes the newly baptized as among the believers who are *steadfastly* continuing in the *apostles' fellowship* and who had *all things in common*, dividing the financial proceeds among all of them, *continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house* (all which implies an organized group). Because Christ is the *Head* of this *body* (Colossians 1:18), it follows that when a person joins Christ he or she joins His body, the Christian Church. Therefore, the idea among some that there should be an initial baptism into Christ and a later second baptism into the Church is a concept foreign to the New Testament.

Finally, baptism results in receiving the Holy Spirit in a special way (Acts 2:38), who then gives at least one spiritual gift to each member (I Corinthians 12:7) in order for that believer to begin a life of some kind of ministry (12:4-5). Note that on one occasion the Holy Spirit was received

before baptism (Acts 10:47) and on one other occasion *after* baptism (Acts 8:15-17). Concerning those in Acts 8, they were Samaritans who had previously been baptized by Philip (v. 5). When this news reached the Jerusalem Church, it sent Peter and John to check it out (v. 14). Then the apostles prayed for their reception of the Holy Spirit and laid their hands on them (vv. 15-17), resulting in their reception of the Holy Spirit. Given these circumstances, it is probable that they had not received the Holy Spirit at their baptism in order that the Jewish community would have Peter and John associated with their receiving of the Holy Spirit and thus seal its acceptance of the Samaritan believers. As for Cornelius' baptism in Acts 10, the Holy Spirit was given to him and his household first, probably to convince Peter that the Lord had accepted them and that they were thus ready for baptism and membership into the Church. In any case, these two exceptions do not invalidate the rule that the Holy Spirit is usually given in a special way at baptism (Acts 2:38).

Preparation for Baptism

In order to be baptized a person must first become a *disciple* (follower) of Jesus (Matthew 28:19). This naturally involves at some level a knowledge of Him and His teachings in order for the person to make a meaningful commitment to Him. Also, because baptism is the door to church membership, it is implied that a person should have sufficient knowledge to understand what he or she is getting into, especially since there are so many different churches teaching different things. Of course, more learning also follows baptism (Matthew 28:19-20). Precisely what knowledge this pre-baptism learning is we are not told. But it is reasonable to conclude that it should consist of a minimal knowledge of the Church's major teachings. In the New Testament most of those baptized in the book of Acts were already God-fearers and only needed to learn and accept Jesus as the promised Messiah and Son of God.

It is true that we all remain sinners until glorification when Jesus returns in glory. However, there is a difference between being a sinner in continual need of God's grace and being practitioners of known sin. John the Baptist required that people repent of their sins before being baptized (Matthew 3:7-11; Luke 3:7-14). The word *repent* means *to perceive afterwards*, implying a change in heart or purpose. In turn, such a change implicitly means there is a corresponding change in the spiritual direction. Luke quotes John the Baptist as explaining that repentance meant to change their ways (Luke 3:10-14). In Acts 2:38 the apostle Peter echoes John the Baptist when he calls on people to repent and then be baptized.

If a person is walking in a known sin, he or she needs to repent of that, which means to stop practicing that sin. Such repentance demonstrates their willingness to turn away from sin before they formalize their relationship with Jesus in baptism. For sinful habits that are visible to others, they reflect badly on the church, which is another reason they should be given up before they join the church. At the same time, of course, everyone struggles with temptations, so all struggling must not end as a prerequisite for baptism or else no one would be baptized.

The Practice of Infant Baptism

Many churches practice infant baptism, such as the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches. Four reasons are the most common ones to defend this practice. First, among some of the churches which practice infant baptism, although not all, baptism is necessary to remove the stain of Adam's original sin which is allegedly inherited by all persons. If this is not done before one dies, he or she cannot be saved. Second, the New Testament reports times when an entire house or household was baptized (Acts 10:47-48; cf. v. 2; 16:15, 31-34; I Corinthians 1:16), so the argument is that these baptisms must have also included infants or small children. Third, Jesus loved and blessed children in a special way (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17), making it seem incongruent not to baptize them. Finally, baptism is seen as the Christian replacement for Jewish circumcision. As circumcision marked one a member of God's covenant community at the age of eight days (Genesis 17:9-14, 23-27; Leviticus 12:2-3; Luke 1:59; 2:21) in Judaism, so baptism marks one a member of God's Christian covenant community.

In our paper "On the Origins and Nature of Sin" we discussed the idea of original sin, that everyone born is credited with having sinned in Adam. That is true, but the *stain* (if you wish to use that term) is the sinful nature, which we also saw will remain even with believers until the Second Coming of Jesus. Therefore, baptism cannot be said to remove it.

Regarding the baptism of entire households, Acts 10:44-48 tells us that it was those of Cornelius' household (v. 2) who *heard the word* spoken by Peter (v. 44) that were baptized. Again, in Acts 16:14-15, when Lydia *opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul* that *she and her household were baptized*. Of the Philippian jailor, belief occurred before baptism (Acts 16:31-35). Of course, supporters of infant baptism only assume that these households had infants or toddlers; they do not know this. In light of this testimony, we can conclude that no infants or toddlers were included in those baptisms of households, for these cannot have understood the word, believed, or opened their hearts.

It is certainly true that Jesus loved little children. However, His blessing of them on one occasion does not imply that they should be baptized. Jesus lifted them up as models for the kind of faith and humility that people ought to have (Matthew 18:2-4). Therefore, their acceptability as candidates for baptism cannot be inferred. Moreover, the fact that baptism requires some level of understanding and belief (Acts 8:36-38), a commitment of spiritual marriage to Jesus, being a disciple of Jesus, and readiness to begin some kind of ministry all excludes infants and small children from baptism because they are not capable of these things.

We do not disagree that baptism is the replacement for circumcision in the Church as the sign of the covenant with God's people. Circumcision was initially not required for Gentile converts at

the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-5, 24, 28-29). The basis for this decision was provided by God Himself in that He had given the Holy Spirit to Gentile converts and thus showed His acceptance of them as being part of His covenant, without them being circumcised (Acts 15:7-9). It eventually became clear that no one, including Jewish Christians, was required to be circumcised (I Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6). One reason for this is because Galatians 3:27-28 declares that in baptism there is *neither male nor female; for you are all one [with each other] in Christ Jesus*. Therefore, baptism, which applies to both males and females, is a better sign of the covenant than is circumcision, which applied only to males. But because baptism is the Christian replacement for circumcision does not automatically mean that babies should be baptized (just because circumcision was for male *babies*).

Concerning the relationship between circumcision and baptism, baptism is both a replacement for Jewish circumcision and is not a replacement for it. The only passage that speaks of circumcision and baptism in the same place is Colossians 2:11-12. It clearly speaks of spiritual circumcision (made without hands...the circumcision of Christ, v. 11), which baptism symbolizes (v. 12). In Deuteronomy 10:15-17 and 30:5-8, God desires to circumcise Israel's hearts. Therefore, physical circumcision is the symbol for spiritual circumcision in the Old Testament, and baptism is the symbol for spiritual circumcision in the New Testament. In that sense, baptism is the Christian replacement for Jewish circumcision. However, there is one notable difference. In the Old Testament physical circumcision was the symbol of the *need* for spiritual circumcision because infants cannot experience spiritual experience. In the New Testament baptism is the symbol that spiritual circumcision has already taken place. Therefore, Jewish circumcision does not mean that infants or toddlers should be baptized.

Therefore, for all of these reasons infant baptism should not be practiced. The alternate view is often known as adult baptism. But baptism does not have to be reserved only for adults. Many young people are capable of sufficient understanding, belief, and making a commitment to Jesus that they too can be eligible for baptism. Of course, some are more mature at an earlier age than others. Therefore, there is no one precise minimum age required for a person to be baptized, although it is traditionally thought that the age of twelve is the age of accountability.

The Mode of Baptism

Different churches practice different modes, or methods, of baptism, such as immersion, sprinkling (aspersion), or pouring (affusion). Although Church history and archaeology both confirm that the original method of baptism was by immersion, the practices of sprinkling and pouring were gradually adopted by the Western Church, at first being employed for those who were too ill or the dying. These exceptions gradually led to the more "convenient" modes of baptism being offered to everyone. Finally, the Western Church officially declared that all three methods of baptism were acceptable for everyone at the Council of Ravenna (in Italy) in 1311.

Does it make any difference how one is baptized? First, we should note that the very Greek word for *baptism* means that which is *immersed* or *dipped under* something. The word was used in secular contexts to refer to the process of dyeing cloth, which was dipped under (or *baptized*) into the liquid dye.

That would seem to settle the matter by itself. However, we will see that this definition of baptism is also reflected in several New Testament passages. In Romans 6:3-6, baptism is described as symbolizing one's death to the old sinful way of life, burial of that way of life, and the resurrection (new birth) to a new way of life (cf. Colossians 2:12). This death, burial, and resurrection is best illustrated by baptism by immersion, where the individual is buried beneath the water and then is raised up out of the water. John 3:23 adds that John the Baptist baptized people at a specific location in the Jordan River because *there was much water there*. Finally, Matthew 3:16 and Acts 8:38-39 refer to two different baptisms by describing the person baptized as coming up out of the water. Therefore, the meaning of the word for *baptism*, its theological significance, and the actual descriptions of baptism where mentioned all exclusively point to baptism as being an act of immersion beneath the water. We thus conclude that any other mode of baptism is, in fact, not baptism at all.

The Eastern Orthodox Church practices what is known as trine immersion, in which the person is immersed three times in the water, each time for a different member of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as per Jesus' statement in Matthew 28:19. First, however, other New Testament passages simply refer to being baptized in the name of Jesus (see the next paragraph). Second, note that the word *name* in Matthew 28:19 occurs only once and it is singular. That means that all three members of the Trinity constitute the *one name* in which people are baptized. In this way, this text does not provide any support for the idea of immersing someone three times. Therefore, we reject the notion of trine immersion in favor of baptism being an act of single immersion.

While on the topic of the mode of baptism, we might mention that some Christians insist that the particular formula given in Matthew 28:19 should always be followed when a person is baptized. That formula, if it can be called that, is to baptize people *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, that is, the one performing the baptism should say those words. While that is certainly valid, note that the New Testament has numerous statements that refer to baptizing people simply *in the name of Jesus Christ* (Acts 2:38), *in the name of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 8:16; 19:5), and *in the name of the Lord* (Acts 10:48). Therefore, we conclude that there is no one right words to say when baptizing someone as long as they involve Jesus or the entire Trinity.

Necessity of Baptism

In John 3:3 Jesus declared that a person must be born *from above* (literal Greek) in order to *see the kingdom of God*. The idea of being born *from above* is explained as being born of *the Spirit* in verse 5, where being *born of water* is given as an addition to the Spirit. Undoubtedly, the idea of being born of water refers to water baptism, for Acts 2:38 teaches that water baptism is accompanied by the reception of the Holy Spirit (who comes *from above* in heaven). Jesus here declares, then, that one must be baptized in order to enter God's kingdom.

Of course, there are exceptions, for Jesus Himself promised the thief on one of the crosses next to Him that he would be in Paradise with Him (Luke 23:42-43). That thief had no time to be baptized, implying that baptism is necessary only when it is physically possible. On this basis, the severely handicapped and the seriously ill may be exempt from baptism and still go to heaven. We might add that the seriously mentally ill and infants and young children are incapable of meeting the preparatory work for baptism and are not automatically excluded from heaven. Therefore, while Jesus' statement certainly makes baptism an important rite, it should not be interpreted as an absolute necessity in order to be saved for everyone.

Rebaptism

What about rebaptism? Is it permissible for someone to be baptized again after his or her first baptism? In Acts 19:1-6 Paul met a group of people who had been baptized by John the Baptist but had never heard of the Holy Spirit. After they learned this new truth Paul baptized them again. Therefore, even for Christians who have been Biblically baptized, if they learn significantly new truths they may be rebaptized. We cannot say, however, that rebaptism should be required.

Ephesians 4:5 speaks of one baptism just as there is only one body, one faith, one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father (vv. 4-6). In this context, the reference to *one baptism* emphasizes the fact it is Christian baptism that is the one true baptism. As such, it really says nothing about the issue of someone being baptized more than once.

We have already shown that baptism is like a wedding ceremony in which a person is "married" to Jesus. In marriage one is not divorced every time the husband and wife have an argument; the relationship is more durable than that. Likewise, a believer is not "divorced" from Jesus simply because he sins even if the sin is committed knowingly and deliberately (although that is dangerous). However, this marriage metaphor does suggest that if a believer actually departs and leaves Jesus behind him in walking in the wrong spiritual direction for a significant period of time, then a "divorce" can be said to have occurred. In turn, this suggests that if such a believer returns to the Lord, a "remarriage" or rebaptism would be appropriate. In the absence of a specific command not to ever allow rebaptism, we conclude that it is permissible under the latter

circumstances. We would also add that if a Christian accepts new truth that requires a whole different lifestyle from his or her previous Christian walk, then rebaptism should be allowed, but not required, for such a circumstance as a special recommitment to Jesus. Naturally, if someone was never baptized in the Biblical mode, then he or she had not actually been baptized, and thus *rebaptism* would not be the correct term for them.

Under the implications of rebaptism, then, it should never occur simply because a lawfully baptized Christian wants to recommit their lives to the Lord in the absence of a total departure from Him. Such would be a misuse or abuse of baptism, and pastors must not permit members of their flock to do that as long as they pastor a given church.

Officiates of Baptism

The question may arise as to who may properly officiate at a baptism. In other words, who has the authority to perform actual baptisms? We have shown earlier that pastors and elders or bishops are the spiritual leaders of a congregation. As theological equals, any of these officers have the right to baptize others. In the early Church, deacons apparently had the right to baptize as well, for Philip did so (Acts 8:5, 12-13, 26-40; cf. 6:1-7). But since the pastor is the chief elder or bishop in the Church as the one who coordinates the work of the local church, the other elders or bishops and deacons should work through the pastor and not on their own. In other words, the pastor should “clear” the person for baptism before the actual baptism occurs and give permission for a given elder (or bishop) or deacon to baptize someone if he or she does not elect to do it himself.

Baptism for the Dead

Mormons are sometimes baptized on behalf of dead loved ones so that the dead person’s soul can then enter heaven. However, the dead person’s soul can choose to accept or reject that baptism. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16), Jesus made it very clear that it is in this life that one must make his choice for or against eternal life (vv. 25-26, 29-31).

I Corinthians 15:29 is the text used to defend this practice. What does that text refer to? Unfortunately, more than thirty different explanations have been given for this text by different scholars. This is due to a lack of historical information in either the rest of the New Testament or outside of it, and due to a difference in understanding the meaning of the word *for* in this text (or even the word *baptized*).

Normally, the Greek word translated *for* in I Corinthians 15:29 means *on behalf of* or *for the sake of*. In other words, the natural way to interpret the passage is that some members were being baptized on behalf of those loved ones or close friends who had died without having been baptized. But the fact that Paul does not stop to condemn this practice is puzzling; of course, he does not

endorse it either. Some have suggested that perhaps this practice refers to those who were baptized in honor of those loved ones who had died after their baptism (*for their sake*). However, that seems an awkward way to say that if this is what was meant.

We do know that in the second century there were some heretics in the Church who practiced baptism for the dead as a means of saving those who died in an unsaved condition. But we do not know if this heresy existed in the first century (Paul died in the mid-60s in Rome), unless this is the only report of that heresy. Again, however, Paul does not rebuke this practice here but only mentions it as one group who also believes in the resurrection.

All we know for certain is that the New Testament does not support the idea that believers can be baptized for other people, whether living or dead, because personal belief and commitment are necessary prerequisites for baptism.

Baby Dedications

The synoptic gospels each record a time when Jesus took little children in His arms and blessed them (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Although neither He nor the apostles ever codified this into a Christian ordinance, it is sometimes used as a basis for having baby dedications in the Church. The fact that such a service does not violate either the letter or spirit of anything in Scripture but illustrates Christ's concern and care for little children is sufficient to justify such a service.

However, there is also a specific Biblical foundation for baby dedications. According to Exodus 13:2, 12 and Numbers 3:12-13, 18:15-16, every firstborn male animal was to be sacrificed at the sanctuary as an offering to the Lord after one month. Likewise, every firstborn male infant was to be consecrated or dedicated to the Lord and a special tax paid at the sanctuary (Numbers 18:15-16). The implication was that the infant was also to appear before the Lord at the sanctuary for this consecration or dedication. This is confirmed by Luke 2:22-23, which states that Jesus was presented at the Jerusalem Temple according to the law. Therefore, there was a dedication service for male infants. Of course, Galatians 3:28 teaches that there is *neither male nor female; for you are all one [with each other] in Christ Jesus*. Therefore, in the Church baby dedications should include all young children, male and female, and not only the firstborn son.

It is the parents, of course, who share in this dedication, for the baby cannot dedicate itself to Jesus. The parents therefore commit themselves to raise the child as a loyal Christian and church member to the best of their ability. Usually in the public setting of a worship service, the pastor or elder (or bishop) says a few words about the spiritual responsibility of the parents and publicly calls for their commitment. Then he takes the child into his or her arms (as did Jesus) and has a special

prayer of dedication. In some churches, the officiant may also anoint the child with oil on its head or forehead.

Holy Communion

All churches celebrate what is called Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist service. In general, this service is understood to be the Christian replacement for the Jewish Passover, for it was instituted by Jesus at Passover time and the regular Passover meal was immediately followed by the presentation of the bread and wine as either representing or becoming the body and blood of Jesus. How this service and its bread and wine is understood, and who participates in it, and how often it is celebrated differ among the churches. We will briefly discuss the basic differences in our explanation of this service.

The Preparatory Service

A few Protestant churches conduct a preparatory service called the Ordinance of Humility or the Ordinance of Foot-washing just prior to the actual Holy Communion service. In this preparatory service, members are spiritually prepared to participate in the communion with Jesus by each one washing the feet of another member. Usually, the men and women do this separately, so that men wash men's feet and women wash women's feet, although sometimes married couples wash each other's feet.

This service is instituted by those churches who believe Jesus' command to His apostles in John 13:14-17 applies to Christians in all ages. (John's gospel is the only one that even mentions the foot-washing.) We support this interpretation for two reasons. First, Jesus told His apostles to wash one another's feet in the future three times in succession (John 13:14, 15, 17). The emphasis of commanding this three times in succession suggests that this was very important to Jesus. Second, Jesus apparently washed the apostles' feet *before* the supper had ended while they were still at their eating places. [Note: John 13:1, together with Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, and Luke 22:7-23, means this *supper* was the regular Passover meal with its focus on lamb and unleavened bread (Exodus 12:43-46; cf. v. 21; 13:3-10).] Although the Greek textual evidence is divided between whether verse 2 reads *after supper* or *during supper*, the record says that after Jesus washed His apostles' feet (vv.3-12) He *sat down again* (v. 12). Although John's gospel does not even mention the presentation of the bread and wine as His body and blood, this presentation must have occurred after His washing of their feet (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-23). The fact that Jesus did not wash their feet immediately prior to the meal suggests that He was intending His act as a *spiritual* preparation for them to experience the special communion with Him of eating His body and drinking His blood. Otherwise, He would have washed their feet prior to beginning the meal, as was the custom in Palestine.

According to John 13, the act of Jesus washing the apostles' feet was a symbol of the ongoing cleansing from post-baptismal sins (v. 10). In this way, it is a kind of mini-baptism, but only in the sense of cleansing from sin (not in the sense of being a door to church membership or marriage to Jesus). The willingness to allow someone else to wash ones' feet symbolizes the desire for that continual cleansing. Jesus' reference to a person who has already *bathed* (v. 10) and needs only to have his feet washed represents the fact that a person who has already been baptized only needs his feet washed to be completely clean. The willingness to wash another person's feet indicates the humility of a servant (v. 16).

The Holy Communion Service Itself

In the presentation of the bread and wine, Jesus declared that the bread was His body and the wine was His blood (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20). The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, along with a few Protestant churches, interpret this to mean that the bread and wine became in some mystical way also the real body and blood of Jesus. The act of changing from bread and wine alone into the mystical but real body and blood of Jesus is called Transubstantiation and is an idea rejected by most Protestant Christians. This entire service is sometimes called the Eucharist, from a Greek word meaning *thanksgiving*. The idea is that the priest offers the bread and wine on behalf of the congregation as a *thanksgiving* offering to God, who then responds by changing it to the real body and blood of Jesus. In this way the Holy Communion service becomes a reenactment of the death of Jesus that is repeated whenever this service is conducted. This view became possible over time because of the Church's gradual understanding of the priestly function of the clergy.

Along with most Protestants, we reject this entire view of the Holy Communion service. First, in John 6 Jesus calls Himself the manna or bread from heaven (vv. 31-35, 48-58) that people should eat (v. 51). He also states that they should eat His flesh and drink His blood (vv. 53-56). Then He interprets His flesh and blood as representing His *words* (v. 63). Therefore, when Jesus declared that the bread and wine of the Holy Communion service were His body and blood, we understand Him to be speaking metaphorically. This is confirmed by the fact that He was present in the room with His apostles at this time, so He could hardly have meant that He was the bread also. Second, Hebrews 9:28 and 10:12 clearly state that Jesus was sacrificed *once* for the sins of the world. Furthermore, the Holy Communion service points back to that one-time sacrifice of Jesus by use of the term *remembrance* (Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24-25). Finally, we have already demonstrated why we reject the entire notion of the priestly function of the clergy, without which it is difficult to see how the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views on Transubstantiation and the service as a reenactment of Christ's death could be possible.

Instead, the Holy Communion service uses the bread and wine as symbols representing the body and blood of Jesus as a visible, experiential way to remember His once-for-all sacrifice for sins.

In addition, this service points *forward* to His Second Coming, after which we will enjoy a personal, literal communion with Jesus, and He will once again drink of the fruit of the vine with us (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18).

As in the Roman Catholic Church and all Protestant churches, we believe that the bread in the Holy Communion service must be unleavened bread, which means it cannot have any yeast in it. This also reflects the unleavened bread used in the Passover service (Exodus 12:8), which the Christian Holy Communion service replaces. In using the language of Passover, the apostle Paul commands Christians to spiritually and continually celebrate Passover (I Corinthians 5:6-7) not *with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (v. 8). Thus, in the Passover or Holy Communion sense, leaven must represent corruption, and Jesus was not corrupted with sin. [The Eastern Orthodox Church uses leavened bread in its service.] If the bread must be unleavened, we argue that the wine must also be unfermented, for the fermentation process is a leavening process. Therefore, the wine should be non-alcoholic, or pure grape juice. This is reinforced by Jesus' own words referring to the communion wine as the *fruit of the vine* (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). The expression the *fruit of the vine* denotes fresh grape juice, before the process of fermentation has occurred. This is confirmed by the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. Most Protestant churches use unfermented wine, or pure grape juice, in their Holy Communion service but only after Tomas Welch, an American Methodist minister, developed a technique in the late 1860s to pasteurize grape juice to prevent it from fermenting. [Pasteurizing is the heating of a liquid to temperatures above 104 degrees, which kills the natural yeast in the grape juice and thus prevents it from eating the natural sugars and converting them into alcohol.] However, the more mainline churches, like the Anglican, Episcopalian, and Lutheran Churches, use alcoholic wine in their services.

Frequency of the Holy Communion Service

The New Testament does not tell us how often the Holy Communion service is to be conducted. Surely, it is not limited to once per year at the Passover time in the spring of the year, because I Corinthians 11:26 simply says that as often as we do it we “proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.” Without any direction as how often to celebrate this service, it may be celebrated at each weekly public worship service, as many churches do (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Christian or Disciples of Christ). Most conservative evangelical Protestant churches celebrate it on average once per month. Still others celebrate once per quarter, or four times per year. It is probably better to celebrate it only periodically in order to ensure that it is viewed as a special service. However, the bottom line is that there is no Biblical answer to this question, from which we may safely infer that it does not make any difference how often we celebrate it. It is more important to celebrate it with a correct theological understanding of its meaning and with the right spiritual attitude.

Participants and Officiates

Who may participate in the Holy Communion service? First, as a service that experientially brings us into a special holy communion with Jesus, only baptized Christians—which are those who have an official relationship with Him—should participate in it. They should be baptized also because the preparatory Ordinance of Humility presupposes someone who is already baptized so that the cleansing of the feet is a sufficient symbol of continual cleansing from sin. Second, Christians should participate in a worthy manner (I Corinthians 11:27), which means that he or she should make certain to confess sins and have them forgiven and to approach this service with the dignity it requires. However, this issue of worthiness is a matter of self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28) and not something the pastor or anyone else should attempt to judge. For these reasons, the Church should practice what is called open communion, that is, any properly baptized Christian has the right to participate, even if they are visitors from another denomination. However, it excludes children who have not been baptized.

Symbols are important and so are the symbolic meanings of actions in ceremonies such as baptism and Holy Communion. Although there is no one right way to perform the Holy Communion service, we believe that participants in the congregation should remain in their seats and receive the bread and wine from the deacons or deaconesses who come to them. This better illustrates the fact that it is Jesus who takes the initiative with us to give us the merits of His sacrifice. However, if the congregants come forward to the communion table to receive the bread and wine from the officiants, that would illustrate the falsehood that it is we who take the initiative to receive the merits of Christ's death.

Who may officiate in the Holy Communion service? As we said with baptism, the pastor and his fellow elders or bishops are theologically equal as the spiritual leaders of the congregation. Therefore, any one of them may lead out in this service, in coordination with the pastor, of course. It would be expected that elders or bishops would be the pastor's assistants in this service if one of them is not leading out. Deacons and deaconesses will probably assist in the distribution of the bread and wine and with the physical arrangements for the preparatory Ordinance of Humility. These would be the natural officers to play an active role in the service itself. However, there is no theological reason that non-officer members cannot assist in this service.

Anointing of the Sick

According to James 5:14-15, sick members of the Church have the right to ask the elders or bishops of the local church to come and *pray* with them and *anoint* them *with oil in the name of the Lord* (v. 14). The promise is that *the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up* (v. 15). That does not mean that an anointing service will always result in the physical healing of the member but that his or her sins will be forgiven (v. 15) and he or she will be saved. In ancient

times olive oil was sometimes applied to wounds in an effort to heal someone. But here the context tells us that *divine* healing is the subject, not human healing. It may be noted that the apostles of Jesus often anointed the sick with oil when they healed people (Mark 6:13).

This service does not support the Catholic teaching of extreme unction, as part of the last rites, in which a priest offers absolution of all sins to a dying person. First, elders or bishops are not priests. Second, forgiveness and spiritual healing depends upon *the prayer of faith* and not the acts or words of the officiant. As always with the official services of the Church, the pastor and his or her fellow elders or bishops are the ones who should lead out in the anointing of the sick.

Church Discipline

The Church, as the body of Christ, has the right to exercise church discipline in certain cases, just as a person has the right to seek healing for his or her body. Some sins are private in nature, and these should be confessed privately. But some sins are open sins in that they are done openly and thus reflect badly on the church body. In those circumstances, as well as when a dispute between members begins to affect the entire body, the Church has the authority to step in and attempt to resolve the crisis. These are always difficult situations, and care should be taken not to engage in professional counseling unless one of the members is a professional counselor.

Matthew 18:15-17 is the key passage that provides the local church with a broad outline of how to proceed with church discipline. First, when one member wrongs another member, the wronged person should approach that individual to seek a resolution. Otherwise, these matters can easily fester until they become long-term disasters. Second, if the person who committed the offense will not listen, then the injured party should take one or two other members and again seek to resolve the issue. Third, if that does not work, then and only then the matter should be taken to the church as a whole. If that final step does not resolve the crisis, then the entire church should treat the person in error *like a heathen and a tax collector* (v. 17). This may involve the official act of disfellowshipping that member, or it may only involve shunning him or her in order to shame that person into resolving the issue or allowing the church to rule on the matter.

In cases of open sin, including the teaching of heresy and sins of the flesh, the pastor and elders or bishops should take the leadership in dealing with the individual member privately at first. If that does not reconcile the situation, then open sin demands that the Church deal with it openly in a special meeting of the church family. Care should be taken to allow the offending member to address the congregation if he or she desires and to otherwise respect their rights as human beings. Due process should already have been spelled out, probably in rules established by the worldwide Church organization. If still unresolved after this step, the church family ought to discuss and then vote on how to deal with the member. Such a vote might be to place the member on probation, denying him or her the right to participate in any leadership roles for a period of time. In extreme cases, the member should be disfellowshipped from the church. After some time has passed, the

church should seek to bring the member back into fellowship if he or she is willing to move away from the sin that caused the problem in the first place. Reconciliation, not punishment, should always be the goal of church discipline.

In cases of public heresy, a higher level of Church governance might have to step in and provide the leadership in the discipline process, especially if the person involved in the heresy is a pastor, evangelist, or any other fulltime employee of that denomination. Again, due process rules should have been predetermined and followed carefully. In the end, if the person does not agree to stop teaching his or her heresy, then that individual should be fired and not given any further leadership role anywhere in the Church. As to church membership, that should be left up to that person's local church to decide what to do, because membership is always a matter primarily of a local church.

Church Socials

One of the most important ways to increase the bonding within any group of people is to hold periodic socials. These relaxed situations, involving food and perhaps innocent games or recreation, serve the social needs of people in a way that other things simply cannot. Therefore, the local church should organize socials on a periodic basis. This principle was recognized by the early Church, whose members in Jerusalem are said to have *continued steadfastly in...fellowship [and] in the breaking of bread* (Acts 2:42). This *breaking of bread* together occurred *from house to house* (v. 46). Certainly, a fellowship lunch following the public worship service is one important part of increasing the bonding of the congregation with each other. However, the food preparation should be minimal on those worship days.

Although no member should be excluded from planning these social events, more women than men are particularly good at seeking to bond with other people. This is certainly, therefore, one area that the pastor and his or her fellow elders or bishops do not need to organize or lead out in.

Community Outreach

Another function of the church is to reach out to the community and assist those who are in dire need. Operating in this area can soften hearts and increase the reputation of the local church in the community. Of course, both financial and manpower resources are limited at the local church level, but there are always some things the church can do in this area. Visiting nursing homes, retirement centers, and prisons, as well as occasionally feeding the homeless is an appropriate activity, as is working with a prison in the collection of personal items that prisoners need. The ultimate goal, as with Jesus' own healing ministry, is to open people's hearts so they will listen to the gospel and be saved. Therefore, community outreach efforts should be focused on that goal of fulfilling the Church's great Gospel Commission. Naturally, the giving of free religious literature

and conducting public evangelistic meetings or Bible-based seminars should be part of each local church's annual plans.

At a more regional, national, or even international level, the various church governance structures and institutions should direct some of their resources to assisting in natural disaster relief efforts and to helping war refugees and the like. Additionally, the Church will probably want to establish and operate medical and educational institutions to help open hearts to hear the gospel. Finally, the direct proclamation of the gospel should be financed via Internet, radio, television, and publishing vehicles. It is a tough challenge, but a Church that views the gospel commission seriously will engage in all of these efforts.

Summary and Conclusion

The Christian Church was established by Jesus Himself, who worked through His apostles to preach the gospel and nurture the first generation of believers. The Church was organized not only to proclaim the gospel to the whole world but to nurture, educate, inspire, and encourage Christians to keep the faith. The door to Church membership is through baptism, in which a believer is joined to Jesus in spiritual marriage and to His body the Church in order to begin a life of ministry. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance.

The structure of the Church involves the spiritual leadership of the pastor and his or her fellow elders or bishops at the local level. But proclaiming the gospel to the whole world, which is the Church's gospel commission or mission statement, requires organization beyond the level of the local church. At all levels of the Church governance structure, the democratic principle should prevail, for the Church ought to be a classless society in which each member is equal to each other in Christ. To be practical and efficient, the Church beyond the local level should use the governance principle of representative government in which delegates are elected to various regional levels' meetings to elect officers through nominating committees and to set general policies for a given level of the Church structure.

The Church has many and varied functions that include public worship, religious instruction, conducting baptisms, baby dedications, the Holy Communion service, anointing the sick, disciplining its members, holding church social activities, and community outreach. Each member receives at least one spiritual gift from the Holy Spirit for the purpose of ministry. These gifts should be employed in Christ's service under the general guidance of the pastor and his or her fellow elders or bishops.